

# IN THE MASTER'S PRESENCE THE SIKHS *of* HAZOOR SAHIB

VOLUME 1: HISTORY

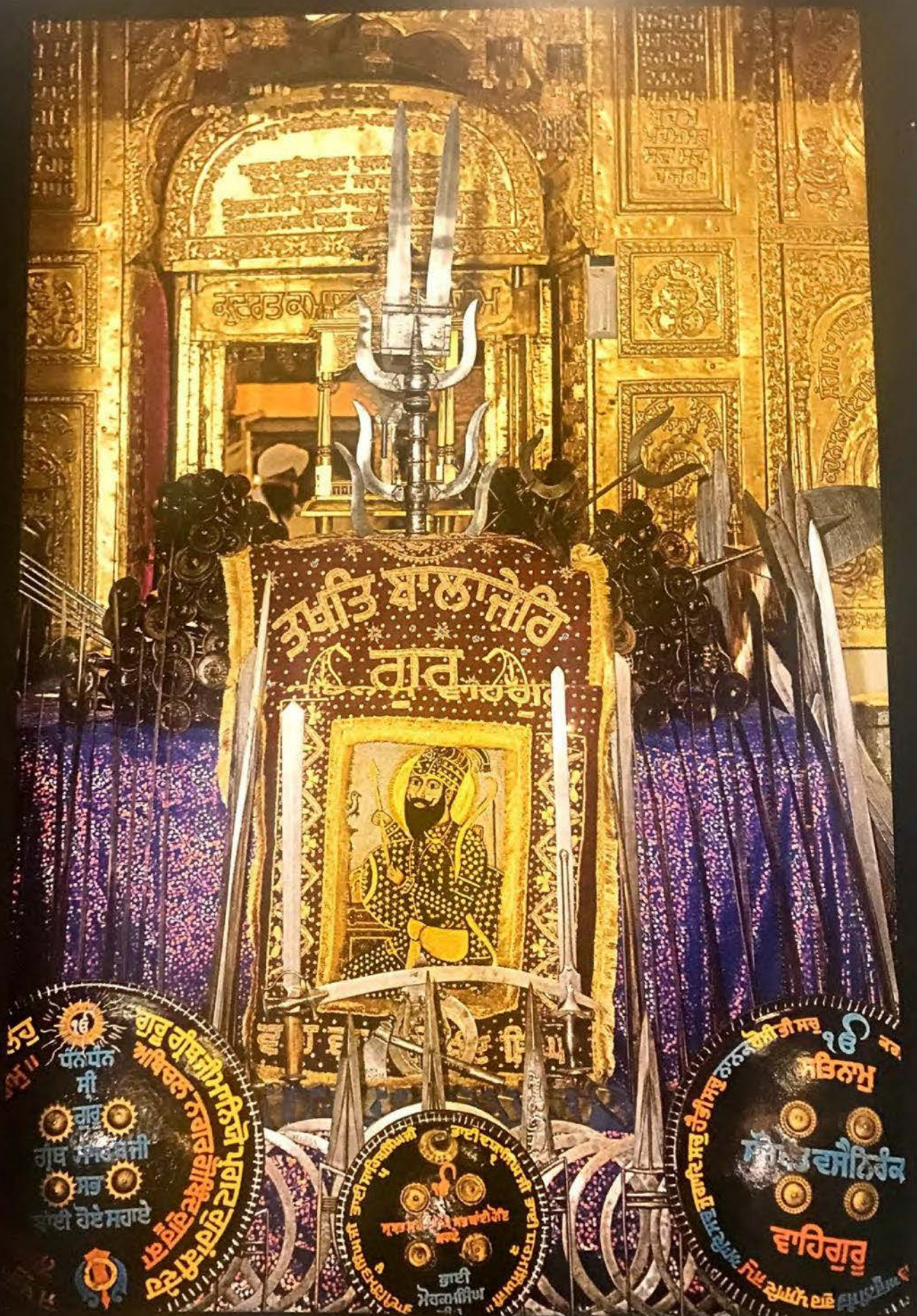


NIDAR SINGH NIHANG & PARMJIT SINGH

Dedicated to

*the warriors, holy men & householders, men, women & children,  
who remained firm in preserving their Guru's traditions & heritage  
at Takht Sach Khand Sri Hazoor Sahib Abchal Nagar  
over the past 300 years*







## PREFACE

Many people became martyrs there; and many houses for fakirs were erected in that place. Amidst them all, they erected a shrine over the Gurú[’s ashes], and, near his burying place, they made many other mausoleums and dharamsálas, and deposited Granth sáhibs in them. The name of that city, which was called *Nader*, was changed to Abchalnagar. In the present day, many Sikhs go there, and offer their oblations with much devotion. In that tomb, thousands of swords, shields, spears, and quoits, are to be found at all times; moreover the Sikhs, who go there, all worship those arms. The Sikhs believe this, that all those arms were formerly the property of Guru Govind Singh himself.<sup>†</sup>

Guru Gobind Singh’s eight-limbed battle standard, *asht-bhuja dhuja*, occupies an eminent position at Takht Sach Khand Sri Hazoor Sahib.

In cogently recounting the sense of bereavement and separation felt by Guru Gobind Singh’s disciples at the time of his death on 7 October 1708, the nineteenth-century author of this passage vividly conveys the deep sense of reverence and mystery that has surrounded the tenth Guru’s final resting place for over three centuries.

The Guru spent his last days camped just outside the town of Nanded, now in Maharashtra State but back then located within a distant quarter of the sprawling Mughal Empire. Referred to by Sikhs as Abchal Nagar (“Everlasting City”), a small shrine dedicated to the memory of the tenth Guru was raised here soon after his demise. Various known as Sach Khand (“Realm of Truth”) and Hazoor Sahib (“Master’s Presence”), the shrine’s modest appearance belied its significance as the last of the four *takhts*<sup>†</sup> or thrones of temporal and spiritual authority for the Sikhs.

The takht rapidly became the focal point of a vibrant community of Sikhs who devoted their lives in its service. The very first ‘Hazoori’ Sikhs were warriors and mendicants who adopted a pattern of life that has endured through time, change and strife. Separated from the Punjab by hundreds of miles and spared the post-annexation ‘Dalhousian revolution’ that transformed the Punjab into a shining colonial jewel, the Hazoori Sikhs steadfastly maintained ancient religious traditions and a fascinating oral history, which uncovers an aspect of Sikh history that appears so astonishing and at odds with modern rhetoric, it is almost considered heresy.

Since some of the most far-reaching events in Sikh history centred on this takht, it rapidly earned the status as a pilgrim destination of great importance.

† Two of these were in the city of Amritsar and the town of Anandpur, both in Punjab, and another in the city of Patna, Bihar.



Generations of pious Sikhs made the arduous journey from Punjab to the fabled shrine in the distant Deccan. Through the passage of time, their collective reminiscences lent Hazoor Sahib a sense of awe and grandeur in the minds of those back home. It was this sentiment that became enshrined in a popular saying among the Akali-Nihang<sup>†</sup> warriors of the Buddha Dal, the fifth itinerant takht: "Just as Haridwar is for Hindus, and Mecca for Muslims, so too is Sach Khand Hazoor Sahib for the Khalsa."

Despite its sacred status, history has been singularly unkind to the Hazoori Sikhs. While bookshelves are crammed full with tomes on virtually every facet of Sikh history centred round the Punjabi experience, very little by way of a connected narrative is available on the Sikhs of either Hazoor Sahib or the Deccan; even less published material exists by way of early photographs or paintings. Until recently, there was no compulsion for us to fill the gap created by the dearth of material dealing with Hazoor Sahib. That all changed two years ago.



At the end of 2006, news reports from India highlighted the wilful destruction of Hazoor Sahib's built heritage in preparation for the tercentenary celebrations slated for October 2008.

As the story unfolded, it became worryingly clear that the shrine had become a victim of a fatal cocktail of ignorance, arrogance and apathy, and made worse by the corrupting influence of 'new' money injected by the central and state governments for infrastructure projects in and around Nanded.

The actions of the takht's custodians, the Gurdwara Board, surprised many observers and heritage lovers. Supposedly charged with protecting and preserving the shrine complex, a brash Board ignored calls made by conservation experts and concerned members of the global Sikh community to stop the demolition. As their pleas fell on deaf ears, several important historical structures in and around the Takht Hazoor Sahib complex were flattened in the name of modernisation. These events crystallised our intention to act, giving rise to this book in the hope that the sad scenes recently witnessed at Hazoor Sahib will never repeat themselves.

It gives us great pleasure, therefore, to present *In the Master's Presence*, the

<sup>†</sup> We use the term "Akali-Nihang" throughout the book to denote a mixed group of "Akali Nihangs" and "Nihangs", both members of the Sikhs' traditional warrior order (see Glossary).



story behind one of the early pillars of Sikh tradition that has now all but disappeared in its original form. In this first volume of two, we delve into the history of the built heritage of Takht Hazoor Sahib and trace the major milestones in the growth of the colony of Hazoori Sikhs.

The earliest Sikh interaction with the region dates back to the time of Guru Nanak's visit to the Deccan shortly before Babur, the first Mughal emperor, wrested control of northern India from the grip of the Afghan sultans of Delhi. Two hundred years passed before Nanded was visited by Guru Nanak's ninth successor, Guru Gobind Singh. The rediscovery of his meditation place from a previous life, a bungled assassination attempt, the passing of his divine authority to the holy *granth* and loyal *panth*, and the raising of the modest structure over his ashes, are some of the crucial events that led to the founding of Takht Hazoor Sahib. From the moment of the takht's origin in 1708, and the emergence of a distinct community of Sikhs devoted to protecting and serving it, to the shameful and insensitive destruction of its unique built heritage in the name of modernisation and beautification three centuries later, *In the Master's Presence* chronicles Hazoor Sahib's eventful history.

The tale is one of Gurus and goddesses, intrigues and treachery, bizarre plots and political patronage, played out by a host of memorable characters—maharajas, warriors, mendicants, emperors, nizams, politicians and policemen—whose lives are intertwined with the fortunes of the tenth Sikh Guru's final resting place. The constant traffic of humanity, lavish gifts and coded messages carried on between Punjab and the Deccan by courtly agents, itinerant Sikh warriors, naked ascetics, rogue spies and jobless mercenaries, all contributed to the tapestry of intrigue and mystery that colours much of the account.

Without a doubt, one of the most beguiling characters to make an appearance is Maharaja Chandu Lal. For over four decades beginning in the first half of the nineteenth century, this diminutive bookkeeper, who rose to become virtual dictator of the Muslim-ruled state of Hyderabad, stands out as Takht Hazoor Sahib's single-most important patron years before Maharaja Ranjit Singh took a keen interest in the Guru's Deccani legacy. This *sahajdhari* Sikh's interactions with his master, the Muslim nizam of Hyderabad, his backer, the British resident, and his co-religionist, the one-eyed Sikh monarch of Lahore, provides a fascinating insight into the broader impact of Sikh polity on nineteenth-century empire-building in the subcontinent.

In volume two of *In the Master's Presence*, we build upon the historical backdrop presented in this first volume, unveiling the ancient traditions and customs conducted within the hallowed walls of the takht. We also explore



the beliefs and practices of the Hazoori Sikhs who live around the takht and regularly take spiritual sustenance from it.

Anyone who has ever visited Hazoor Sahib cannot help but notice how brazenly proud the Hazoori Sikhs are of their Singh-Khalsa identity. By way of an example, not only are they steadfastly against cutting their own hair, a fundamental stipulation of the Singh-Khalsa code of conduct, they also desist from cutting their children's hair. This is one of the most significant physical markers distinguishing Hazoori Sikhs from Punjabi Sikhs, contrasting starkly with the latter's laxity in this respect.

It does not take much to tease out other dissimilarities, the most telling of which are their manner of speech and physical features. Given the demographic factors affecting each group, these differences come as no surprise. The Hazoori Sikhs have flourished in a different cultural and social context, with a host of diverse factors—ethnic, linguistic and political—amplifying the gulf between them and the Punjabis. However, perhaps the most distinguishing facet that places the Hazoori Sikhs at odds with the vast majority of other Sikhs is the ideology underpinning their beliefs.

While fervently acknowledging an undivided loyalty to Guru Gobind Singh, the Hazoori Sikhs take a radically different approach from many of their Punjabi brethren in their understanding of what it means to be a Sikh, specifically vis-à-vis the 'Hindu' world. It is widely accepted that the origins of the divergence between the 'mainstream' Sikh orthodoxy and 'Hazoori' Sikh belief can be traced as far back as the late-nineteenth century, specifically with the ascent of the popular reform movement known as the Singh Sabha ("gathering of Singhs").

Riding on the crest of an uplifting ideological wave, the Singh Sabha surged through the region's bustling bazaars and ploughed fields with its protestant-inspired notions of a homogeneous Sikh identity. Though hugely influential in Punjab, the movement failed to penetrate the deep south, allowing the Hazoori Sikhs to continue on their path, unadulterated by the religious revolution mounted by their northern co-religionists.

There is no dearth of scholarly material on the origins and development of the Singh Sabha. Its founders were Sikhs from a variety of backgrounds who took up the mantle of promoting and preserving what they perceived to be a Sikh identity under assault from two types of people. The first was that of the obsessive Christian missionary who received tacit support from the colonial administration. The second was the corrupting influence of the pernicious Brahmin, the "Hindu boa-constrictor" who was slowly squeezing the life out of the fledgling Sikh community.



What began as a journey of individual inquiry rapidly turned into a mass movement that would divide the community into two bitterly opposed camps, which broadly reflected the prevailing schools of thought at the time. On the one hand were the modernists, largely English-educated middle-class Sikhs based at Lahore, who were inspired to re-examine their faith from the perspective of the western orientalis. On the other were the traditionalists, headquartered at Amritsar and steeped in the traditions of the old Sikh world that had once flourished under the leadership and guidance of the four traditional Sikh orders: Udasis, Akali-Nihangs, Nirmalas and Sewapanthis. Counted among their number were the hugely influential descendants of the Sikh Gurus, the Bedis, Trehans, Bhallas and Sodhis, who commanded large followings and immense resources. Significantly, the hereditary incumbents of Sikh shrines or gurdwaras were also drawn from this side of the fault line.

The modernists' unbridled missionary zeal, combined with the ability to exploit modern print technology, propelled them towards the goal of realising the 'de-Hinduised', 'pure essence' (*tat*) of a uniform Sikh identity that they deemed suitable for modern times. The Tat Khalsa, as the Lahore Singh Sabha came to be known, revised and reformed their way through the numerous ancient texts, customs and rituals that either failed to conform to their narrow interpretation of Sikh scripture and history, or fell short of the idealised standards they had set for themselves. Assiduously editing out heterodoxy, the Lahore Singh Sabha even questioned the validity of certain compositions included in the Adi Guru Granth Sahib, namely those written by 'Hindu' bhagats and bards. Some of its adherents went as far as printing copies of the holy scripture that had been expunged of this 'Hindu' contagion.

The Lahore Singh Sabha also challenged individuals, orders and institutions regarded as culpable for having allowed such degenerative thoughts and practices to flourish in the public places of Sikh worship, the gurdwaras. Thus, the time-honoured customs and status of the 'heretical' traditionalists, who publicly acknowledged their Hindu antecedents, came under fire in a series of well-publicised campaigns communicated via pamphlets and the vernacular press for their 'complicity' in the decline of the pure, unambiguous Sikh faith.

The subsequent period of polemics, acrimonious scrutiny and intense vilification took its toll on the traditionalists. Struggling to maintain their hold over the wider community, the final blow came in the 1920s with an unprecedented upheaval that saw the modernists take control of the several hundred gurdwaras spread across Punjab.

As the old order made way for the new, so too did the generations-old, mul-



tifarious practices, customs and rituals disappear, only to be replaced with those that conformed to the ideals first formulated by the Lahore Singh Sabha.

For the zealous victors, the triumph of what came to be known as the Gurdwara Reform Movement was enough to vindicate their revisionist tendencies, which were increasingly viewed as being beyond reproach. In stark contrast, the traditionalists had little to celebrate; forced to relinquish their conventional power base to the *zeitgeist*, they were pushed or voluntarily withdrew to the margins of Sikh society where they found solace in the small pockets of support in their local constituencies.

Observing these tumultuous events from far afield were the staunchly traditional Hazoori Sikhs. It was precisely owing to their remoteness from the customary Sikh heartlands in Punjab that enabled them to retain control of Takht Hazoor Sahib and keep its traditions intact, which from their perspective, were original and incontrovertible.

Firmly entrenched at opposite ends of the ideological spectrum, this separation allowed significant differences to persist in a whole range of social practices, life cycle rituals, spiritual beliefs and views of nature and the cosmos; even the fundamental question as to what qualified as scripture remained unresolved. Consequently, an unbridgeable chasm divided the two mindsets.

In tandem with post-Independence India's improving transport facilities came the flood of pilgrims to Hazoor Sahib. They travelled from Punjab and the diaspora, bringing with them both a great deal of wealth and the Lahore Singh Sabha's yardstick, with which they measured and judged the Hazoori Sikhs.

Today, while Punjabi Sikhs chastise the Hazooris with the charge that they have grafted 'Hindu' or 'Brahmin' customs and philosophy into their daily lives, resulting in profane rituals being practiced within the takht, Hazoori Sikhs counter by insisting that they alone have preserved the *bona fide*, unalloyed traditions imparted by Guru Gobind Singh to his loyal disciples.

Who is 'right'? Who has the credible proof to support their assertions? If the Hazoori Sikhs are to be believed, is it really possible that millions of devout practicing Sikhs have got it all so horribly 'wrong'? Hazoori Sikhs posit that earlier generations of Punjabi Sikhs spurned the true traditions in the process of accommodating the British Raj. According to them, the process of the subjugation of Punjab by the East India Company had a lasting effect on the original Sikh traditions. The Punjabi Sikhs, they say, will never admit as much.

The sheer fact that the Hazoori Sikhs pride themselves on being the last bastion of ancient Singh-Khalsa tradition is what makes them so fascinating to study. At present, they are mired in a struggle between the preservation of



tradition in the face of the pressure to modernise. Their story deserves to be told now more than ever, since the unique 'Hazoori' viewpoint is also under threat from today's revisionists.

*In the Master's Presence* endeavours to bring a greater understanding of the colourful and proud Hazoori Sikh community, which counts its blessing for always being "in their master's presence", to the rest of the Sikh world.



In preparing this volume, we drew upon a wealth of written materials that included numerous historical accounts, administrative records, letters, diaries, news reports and *hukamnamas* penned in Punjabi, Persian and English, and housed in libraries, museums, archives and private collections around the world.

Since this is the first effort to tell a connected narrative of Hazoor Sahib, we made special efforts to tell it from the point of view of the local tradition. We made several field trips to Hazoor Sahib during the period 1999 to 2007, during which we gained the trust and confidence of the Hazoori Sikhs, whom we found to be friendly and open. Invited into their homes, they permitted us to observe and query their practices and beliefs. For a broader understanding of the traditional (*sanatan*) Sikh mindset, we have relied upon over twenty-five years of research and interviews with the Akali-Nihang, Udasi, Nirmala and Sewapanthi Sikh orders. Aided by this largely untapped resource, we have gained a better grasp of the 'mechanics' behind Hazoori Sikh practices which differ so greatly from the modern-day Sikh mainstream.

Besides the written and spoken word, we have also tapped into the rich and exotic reservoirs of visual heritage to bring to life the unfamiliar world of Hazoor Sahib in over 150 illustrations of paintings, photographs, portraits, maps, artefacts and documents from several public and private archives. Among these are examples of the sumptuous murals that have decorated the inner walls and ceilings of Hazoor Sahib since the 1830s. It is regrettable to report that several exquisite and vibrant examples of Sikh fresco art that once adorned the walls of some major shrines in Punjab, and reproduced in this book, are no longer extant, having been destroyed or painted over in recent times. This sad state of affairs is due mainly to a dangerous apathy and wilful disregard for the heritage on the part of their custodians.

Nidar Singh Nihang  
Parmjit Singh







## INTRODUCTION

In the early sixteenth century, Guru Nanak (1469–1539) and his faithful *mureed*<sup>†</sup> companion, Bhai Mardana, traversed the broken and hilly surface of the Deccan Plateau in southern India as they travelled northwards from Bidar, the former capital of the expansive but crumbling Bahmani Sultanate.

One of their stopping points was Nanded,<sup>‡</sup> a small town situated on the north bank of the River Godavari. In Guru Nanak's time, it was thinly populated but this was not always the case; in ancient times under the early Hindu monarchs, it was said to have been well populated and fruitful.<sup>1</sup> Prior to the Guru's visit, Nanded was the capital of the Telangana district of the Muslim-ruled Bahmanid Empire. Stretching south of the Vindhya mountain range, from the Arabian Sea to the Bay of Bengal, this great medieval Indian kingdom was founded in 1347 by its Turkish governor, Ala-ud-din Bahman Shah, who revolted against his overlord in the north—the powerful Sultan of Delhi.

The Delhi Sultanate emerged in the thirteenth century when Muslim rulers, mainly Turkish speakers, from Iran, Central Asia and Afghanistan, governed Northern India. Ruling from Delhi, and lured by reports of fabulous wealth, these 'Turks'<sup>§</sup> had infiltrated southwards in the early fourteenth century and subdued the Deccan which until then had been ruled by Hindu kings. Islamic rule was to prevail there for the next six centuries, until 1950, when the last nizam of Hyderabad relinquished power to the Indian Union.

A remarkably varied population coloured the Deccani canvas. Not only were there Indian Muslims and Hindus, but also large and powerful communities of Turks, Persians, Arabs and Africans. Sufi mystics, scholars, writers, merchants and military men from all over the Middle East came to preach, write, trade or conquer, lured by generous royal patronage. Until the Mughal conquest of 1687, the Deccan, with its long-standing commercial links with the Arab world across the Arabian Sea, became India's greatest centre of Arabic learning and literary composition.

This mix of races was culturally enriching for the region, but also a source of perennial political instability with Muslim invariably fighting Muslim. Turks, Arabs and Persians formed a clique of 'foreigners', comprising mainly Shi'a Muslims, who were bitterly opposed to the Sunni 'natives', the Indians and Afghans.

A Deccani artist captures the moment when Guru Nanak calls on his faithful companion and gifted *rebabi*, Bhai Mardana, to lend a melodious tune to his sacred utterances.

† Literally "true devotee". This was the designation used for the Muslim devotees and allies of the Sikh Gurus.

‡ Also written as Nander.

§ In Punjab, Muslim invaders came to be regarded as "Turks" as a result of their common linguistic heritage.



Inter-religious tensions were also present, but, surprisingly, relations between Hindus and Muslims had always been more congenial in the Deccan compared to the north, which was plagued by the polarising forces of religious intolerance. Hindu kings steeped in the Deccani tradition made very public gestures of communal acceptance by dressing in Islamic court attire; at the same time, the region's Muslim sultans employed Hindu prime ministers.



As the Bahmani Sultanate disintegrated between 1490 and 1512, its provincial governors declared their independence, carving out the five Muslim-ruled kingdoms collectively known as the Deccan Sultanates: Bijapur, Golconda, Ahmadnagar, Berar and Bidar. Nanded fell within the realm of the smallest of the five Sultanates, Bidar. Its founder, Qasim Barid, broke away from the Bahmani Empire in 1492, but his Barid Shahi dynasty would disappear in 1619 when the Adil Shahis of the Bijapur Sultanate to the west absorbed it.

In the seventeenth century, the Hindu Marathas revolted under the leadership of warrior-king Shivaji (1630–1680) and captured major parts of the Deccan Sultanate. Bijapur maintained a precarious independence but, with the Sultanate severely weakened, Bijapur eventually fell into the hands of the Mughals in 1686. Until this time, the Deccan Sultans, adherents of Shi'a Islam and closely allied with the Safavids of Iran, had preserved their political independence from the Sunni Mughal Empire in northern India.

It was the Mughal emperor, Shah Jahan (1592–1666), who had first advanced upon the Deccan Sultanates half a century earlier. His goal was finally achieved by his infamous son, Aurangzeb (1618–1707), the last, and most zealous, of the Great Mughals. The ambitious southern campaign emptied the Mughal Empire's coffers and precipitated its decline. The dimming light of the Mughal Empire faded over the following 150 years during which time its unrepentant successors—the Persians, Afghans, Marathas, Sikhs and British—dismantled the empire that had controlled the fate of northern India for two centuries.



During the Deccan campaign, Aurangzeb established his headquarters at Bidar, then split into six divisions, one of which was Nanded.



In the annals of its antiquity,<sup>†</sup> many myths and stories describing how Nanded came by its name have endured. The king Nandas was said to have ruled over Nanded before the time of Chandragupta, who ruled northern India in the third century BC. He was one of nine kings who ruled Tata, a large kingdom of which Nanded was said to have formed one part of its boundary, thus lending it the designation Nand-tata, later corrupted to Nanded. Other accounts attributed its name to the old fort Nanagiri of the Kakatia kings.<sup>‡</sup> There were those who believed the town's name derived from Nandigan in honour of the bull-vehicle of Shiva who meditated on the banks of the Godavari; to mark this, the town annually celebrated the day of Nandi by taking out a procession of oxen. Another tradition gave weight to the idea that it was originally called Nau Nand Dera, the story being told of how the nine (*nau*) legendary Indian sages known as rishis meditated on the riverbank. A further explanation suggests that Nau Nandi Tek was the name of the place and the small hamlets that collectively surrounded it combined to form Nanded.<sup>§</sup>

Even though several of these accounts would have been current at the time of Guru Nanak's visit, he fathomed its importance in his own way. As he looked up at the skies one day, the Guru smiled before closing his eyes. He remained silent for a while before speaking to Bhai Mardana:

O brother Mardana! This is my place of penance from Sat Yuga. There was once a town established here that covered an expanse of six miles. All the houses were built from gold and were inhabited by the sages of yore. O Mardana, in my tenth incarnation I will reveal this place and establish Sach Khand, the Realm of Truth.<sup>4</sup>

The Guru's pronouncement gave rise to the myth that Nanded was once at the heart of a magnificent golden city which itself lay at the very centre of the universe.<sup>5</sup> Its circumference was said to have been sixty miles and at its centre resided the *jot* (light) of Nirankar, the Formless One, in whose divine court served ninety million celestial beings (*nau crore devtas*). In the wake of Guru Nanak's sojourn a small congregation (*sangat*) of Sikhs, also known as Nanakpanthis,<sup>6</sup> sprung up at Nanded. They would have to wait two centuries

† The Pandavas of the epic tradition are said to have travelled through the country around the town of Nanded.

‡ A unit of ten million; thus nine crore is ninety million.

§ The literal meaning of panth is 'path', a term used to designate groups following particular teachers or doctrines. Thus, Nanakpanthis are the followers of Nanak's spiritual path.

before Guru Nanak's tenth incarnation returned as predicted to reveal his secret to the world: *Sach Khand*, the Realm of Truth.



Guru Gobind Singh (1661–1708) arrived at Nanded near the end of August 1708. The Guru had undertaken the journey south the previous year to meet with a penitent Emperor Aurangzeb who had reached the end of a remarkable, but tyrannical, reign over an extensive realm. Aurangzeb's 'Turk' rule had brought great suffering to the poor, something the Guru would not tolerate:

On seeing the plight of the poor, the True Guru showed great mercy, like the wind which blows over sandalwood trees and gives its fragrance to all. The Guru gathered all the poor low castes and then, making them Singhs, he turned them into *kshatriya*<sup>†</sup> warriors. Everything the Turks had stolen, he would give to them to enjoy. The Guru considered this to be his *dharam*.<sup>‡</sup> He did a great deed for the poor. That is why the people called him the Cherisher of the Poor.<sup>6</sup>

In a striking letter addressed to the Mughal monarch, the Guru reproached him for his misrule and made him aware of the scandalous action of his unscrupulous officials that fell woefully short of the standards of his austere Sunni Muslim faith that he had imposed upon himself and his administration. Circumstances had forced the Guru to come to the battlefield and take up arms. In justification of his decision to act, he wrote to the emperor: "When things are past any stratagem, it is *halal* [religiously licit] to draw one's sword."<sup>7</sup>

Further, the Guru sought justice for the cold-blooded murder of his two youngest sons, six-year-old Fateh Singh and nine-year-old Zorawar Singh, at the hands of Nawab Wazir Khan (d. 1710), the governor of Sirhind. The Rajput kings of the Punjab hill states, who allied themselves with the nawab against the Sikhs, were also complicit in the charge. Emperor Aurangzeb agreed to an audience with the Guru but the anticipated meeting never materialised; the Guru received news of Aurangzeb's death in March 1707 while camped at Baghaur in Rajasthan just weeks before they were due to meet.

† The archetypal Hindu warrior-kings who, in ancient times, protected their kingdoms from external aggression and internal strife.

‡ The divine, all-embracing universal law.



In the ensuing war of succession, the Guru lent his support to the eldest of Aurangzeb's sons. The liberal-minded Prince Mu'azzam (1643–1712), the viceroy of Punjab, was already acquainted with the Guru through his former tutor, Bhai Nand Lal, who later in life received patronage at the Guru's court. Attracted by the Guru's bearing and manner, the Mughal prince quickly struck up a friendship. The Guru accepted his company, acknowledging the prince's love of saints whom, it is said, he had served with devotion in his previous life.<sup>8</sup>

In 1698, Prince Mu'azzam had been tasked by his much-annoyed father, engrossed as he was in the incessant Deccani affairs, with subduing and collecting taxes from Punjab's dissenting Hindu Hill Rajas. The prince's agent, Mirza Beg, conducted a desultory campaign in the hills. Under orders, the Guru's residence at Anandpur was left well alone, but the dwellings of those who had deserted the Guru's protection, and instead fled for safety in the upper mountains, were devastated. At the time, the Guru gave due recognition to the nature of the relationship between the Mughal rulers descended from Emperor Babur (1483–1530) and the Sikh Gurus:

One is of Baba [Nanak] and one is of Babur. Parmeshvar has made it so. Recognise one as the master of the spiritual realm the other as the master of the temporal realm. Those who do not deliver the Guru's money to him, the successors of Babur shall seize and take away forcibly from them. They will be greatly punished, and their houses will be plundered.<sup>9</sup>

A decade on, the Guru repaid the favour to Prince Mu'azzam in the hotly contested struggle for succession. In June 1707 on the battlefield of Jajau, between Agra and Dholpur, the Guru made his appearance at a crucial moment to aid the demoralised prince against his brother, Azam Shah. Mu'azzam was delighted at the sight of the Guru, garbed conspicuously like his Akali-Nihang warriors:

Dressed in a blue gown he is present, with a hawk on his arm and plume in his turban. His plume is blue, the jewel [in the plume] is blue and so are his clothes; the blue jewel is large. [His appearance is] as if the clouds have spread a net [in the sky] and he is the streak of lightning within the clouds. The son of the emperor [Mu'azzam] watched on.<sup>10</sup>

The battle for succession eventually fell in Mu'azzam's favour. After succeeding to the throne, he took the name Bahadur Shah and invited the Guru to his court. While camped at Agra in August, they exchanged gifts and the emperor

duly honoured the Guru as a *darvesh* (holy man).<sup>11</sup> As the royal camp travelled southwards to suppress another crown prince's uprising at Hyderabad, Bahadur Shah's request to accompany the Mughal army was accepted by the Guru who rode at the head of his "two or three hundred horsemen bearing spears and some footmen."<sup>12</sup>

During the march, they entered into diplomatic talks and their initial meetings had been civil. The Guru pressed the new emperor towards reversing his Aurangzeb's oppressive measures against the non-Sunni populace and demanded justice for his sons' murders. But it was to no avail; the emperor, well aware of his weak position, was in no position to oppose the bigoted orthodox Sunni faction that had wielded enormous control within the court during his father's reign. Neither would he punish his powerful ally, the nawab of Sirhind, who had contributed liberally to his recent campaign.<sup>13</sup> After seeking the Guru's advice on what to do next in the face of the challenge from his brother, Kam Baksh, Bahadur Shah arranged to take his army towards Hyderabad. The route took them through Nanded on the banks of the River Godavari where they halted for several days. While the emperor moved off to continue his campaign, the Guru remained at Nanded to consider his plans.<sup>14</sup>



# 1. THE EVERLASTING CITY





# 1. THE EVERLASTING CITY

Guru Gobind Singh arrived at Nanded with all the majesty of a regional Rajput court. In his entourage were 300 heavily armed Akali-Nihang warriors and a stately retinue bustling with mendicants, poets, scholars, musicians, cooks and scribes. He camped, as he always did while travelling from place to place, about a mile outside the town.

Guru Gobind Singh with a Nihang attendant.

The Guru and his restless warriors spent much of their time engaged in his favourite pastime, hunting wild game that inhabited Nanded's deep forests. His presence drew a large and varied audience who came to listen to his sermons and sought solace in his guidance. Among them were the small Nanakpanthi congregation that had developed over the past two centuries. Since Guru Nanak's visit, Udasi sadhus had spiritually nurtured these Sikhs. The Udasis were devotees of Guru Nanak's eldest son, Baba Sri Chand (1494–1629). They had spread out from Punjab into the farthest reaches of the land to convey the Guru's spiritual legacy of truth, love and universal brotherhood in the idiom of the local people, just as the Guru had done before them.

During one of these gatherings, Guru Gobind Singh quietly selected an elegantly crafted arrow from his quiver and placed it in his bow. Aiming towards the direction of the town, he released it high into the sky. Everyone watched on in puzzlement as the projectile disappeared into the distance. The Guru was about to fulfil Guru Nanak's prophecy.



The arrow landed several hundred metres away in the grounds of a mosque. It had not always been an Islamic place of worship; it was once the site of an ancient ashram, but Muslims had forcibly seized it several generations earlier and built a mosque over it. The Guru knew the site's history and was about to reveal its secret to his Sikhs.

The Guru, it is told, founded the ashram and a small shrine here in his previous incarnation as Dusht Daman ("destroyer of evil") in Sat Yuga.<sup>†</sup> It was at this place that he had helped Chandi, the Hindu tutelary goddess of war, to defeat the demons.<sup>†</sup> With victory secured, he performed his penance here. Soon afterwards, he related to his Vaishnava disciples the account of the mighty battle between Sarbloh Avtar and the demon king Birjnad. They wrote up the various episodes of the narration and compiled it in a great *granth* (volume). Legend

<sup>†</sup> The traditional accounts relate how Chandi assured Dusht Daman of her support when he would establish a new Panth in Kal Yuga.



This gilt-copper panel shows a penitent Madho Das at the moment he declares himself to be the Guru's slave. Born Lachhman Dev, he was renamed Madho Das after being initiated into the Bairagi order by his Guru Ram Das. The Bairagis are followers of Ramanand. The Ramanadi have their own militant order of fighting ascetics also known as Khalsa, and can still be seen at the Kumbh Mela.

has it that generations of Vaishnava *mahants* (heads) of the ashram guarded it in expectation of their master's return in Kal Yuga when he would reclaim it. Successive mahants obeyed the pledge faithfully and, in spite of the shrine's current state, they still congregated around it, awaiting the return of their master who would emerge in the incarnation of a great warrior-Guru.<sup>2</sup>

On Guru Gobind Singh's arrival at Nanded, the incumbent mahant, Nau Nand, immediately recognised the good omen. His late predecessor, Brahma Nand, had told him that he was blessed since the master of the shrine would return to collect his property during Nau Nand's lifetime. The master would be known by the name Gobind. "When he comes you must go and pay him homage. He himself will recognise you and call you over and ask for the granth."<sup>3</sup> In the hope of finally fulfilling his destiny, Nau Nand set off towards the Guru's camp.

The Guru held court daily in the morning and afternoon when many people would gather to hear his discourses. An excited Nau Nand quietly sat at the very back of one of these gatherings and waited impatiently for the Guru's call. The Guru had indeed spied him; he sent an Akali Nihang Singh to fetch the sadhu. On approaching the Guru, Nau Nand fell to the ground and reverentially prostrated with his entire body in the attitude of a stick, his arms outstretched towards the Guru.<sup>†</sup> The Guru invited him to take a seat beside him. After inquiring into his health, the mahant was astonished when the Guru next asked about Brahma Nand. "I know that the Muslims have built a mosque over my ancient shrine." Tears welled up in Nau Nand's eyes and he asked for the Guru's forgiveness for himself and his predecessors at being unable to prevent the Muslims from taking over his property. The Guru reassured him, "Munivar,<sup>‡</sup> I know what has happened. That is why I have come to uproot the bigots of Sharia. To punish the evil ones, I had to resort to arms."<sup>4</sup> The Guru told him of his life's mission: to destroy the tyranny of the Turks who were so blind in their faith that they did

<sup>†</sup> This "stick salutation" is known as *dandaut namskar*.

<sup>‡</sup> A name used in Sikh writings for a great sage.



not desist from such evil. He would soon reclaim his shrine but before doing so, he asked Nau Nand to bring him his *granth*. An astonished gathering watched on as the mahant brought the text out from under his blanket. After saluting it gently with a touch of his forehead, Nau Nand handed over the *Sarbloh Granth*,<sup>†</sup> much to the Guru's pleasure.



The firing of an arrow at a mosque caused a great stir amongst the local Muslim populace. To help resolve this unusual predicament the Guru called upon the emperor's authority of arbitration. He informed Bahadur Shah of the problem: "This is the place of my shrine of Sat Yuga. Your co-religionists have built over it by force. Even though it is mine I am still willing to buy this holy site from them."<sup>‡</sup> The Guru's demand naturally astounded the emperor and the maulvi custodian of the mosque. He offered to prove his assertion to the doubters; if successful, the Muslims agreed to accept the Guru's claim. The Guru explained that in his previous incarnation as Dusht Daman he had left some objects here from the time of his penance in Sat Yuga. He ordered his Singhs to begin digging where the arrow had fallen. The first thing they came across was a pile of ash indicating the Guru's ancient meditation place. As they continued to dig, they unearthed a water pitcher and a rosary, then another vessel and a gourd-shell bottle.<sup>§</sup> The findings astounded everyone. Having silenced his doubters the Guru offered to purchase the plot of land from its owner, Sayyid Sabir Shah Faqir. As compensation, he proposed to construct a new mosque at his own expense wherever the maulvi wished.<sup>†</sup> The suggestion met with approval from the Muslims.<sup>‡</sup> Having secured the site, the Guru's camp was relocated to the mosque's environs where the building was swiftly demolished by his warriors.



Some months earlier whilst journeying southwards through Rajasthan, the Guru was greatly honoured at the hermitage of Jait Ram, a Dadupanthi<sup>§</sup> mahant.

† See volume II for more on the *Sarbloh Granth*.

‡ Until recently, before the present Gurdwara Board came to power, the descendents of the original maulvi of the mosque received a pension and an annual gift of rations on their festivals from Takht Hazoor Sahib. Until his death a few years ago one of the family's Muslim elders regularly came to the shrine to recount this event to the Sikh congregation.

§ A devotee of the Rajasthani saint, Dadu Dayala (1544 -1604).

When the sadhu learnt of the Guru's desire to visit Nanded he alerted him of an arrogant warrior-turned-Vaishnava Bairagi sadhu who lived there. A Rajput by birth, he went by the name of Madho Das (1670–1716) and was said to be “not only a great warrior, but likewise a magician”;<sup>8</sup> his penchant for humiliating other sadhus with his occult powers was well known. Jait Ram thought it proper to warn the Guru to stay away from the Bairagi recluse. The Guru smiled defiantly at the suggestion and replied:

You are clean-shaven, shorn-haired vegetarian ascetics who eat pulse seed and millet. We are Singhs who bare uncut hair and weapons. We hunt and eat, and have the mindset of lions. Even if before I had no plans of visiting him, now I will.<sup>9</sup>

The Guru found Madho Das' ashram deep in the jungles on the banks of the Godavari. Madho Das was away on a short walk so the Guru deliberately took up a seat on the bedstead reserved for the Bairagi. He ordered the Akali-Nihangs to shoot and kill some of the Bairagi's pet goats and cook him a meal. As was intended, the crack of the gun attracted the attention of the fanatical vegetarian. When an infuriated Madho Das discovered the intruders and the sacrilege they had committed by killing his goats (compounded by it being a solar eclipse that day<sup>†</sup>), he sent five highly accomplished warriors (*birs*) to attack the Guru. They returned to him in a bloody state, defeated by the Guru's Singhs. Next, he mobilised a large crowd of Hindus from Nanded and attempted, but failed, in lodging a complaint with Bahadur Shah. However, following a frank conversation with the Guru the offended Bairagi was quickly humbled. He fell at the Guru's feet and offered his life to his cause; he submitted himself to become the Guru's *banda* (slave).<sup>10</sup>



With the ascetic Hindu warrior humbled, the Guru sought out Bahadur Shah who was drawing up plans to defeat his brother at Hyderabad. On the back of their newly forged friendship, the Guru once again stressed the need to resolve the demands contained in his official petition. The message was clear: remedy

† A total eclipse was seen in eastern and northern India on 14 September 1708. It would have been visible as a partial eclipse from a much larger geographic region. (Source: Eclipse Predictions by Fred Espenak, NASA/GSFC).





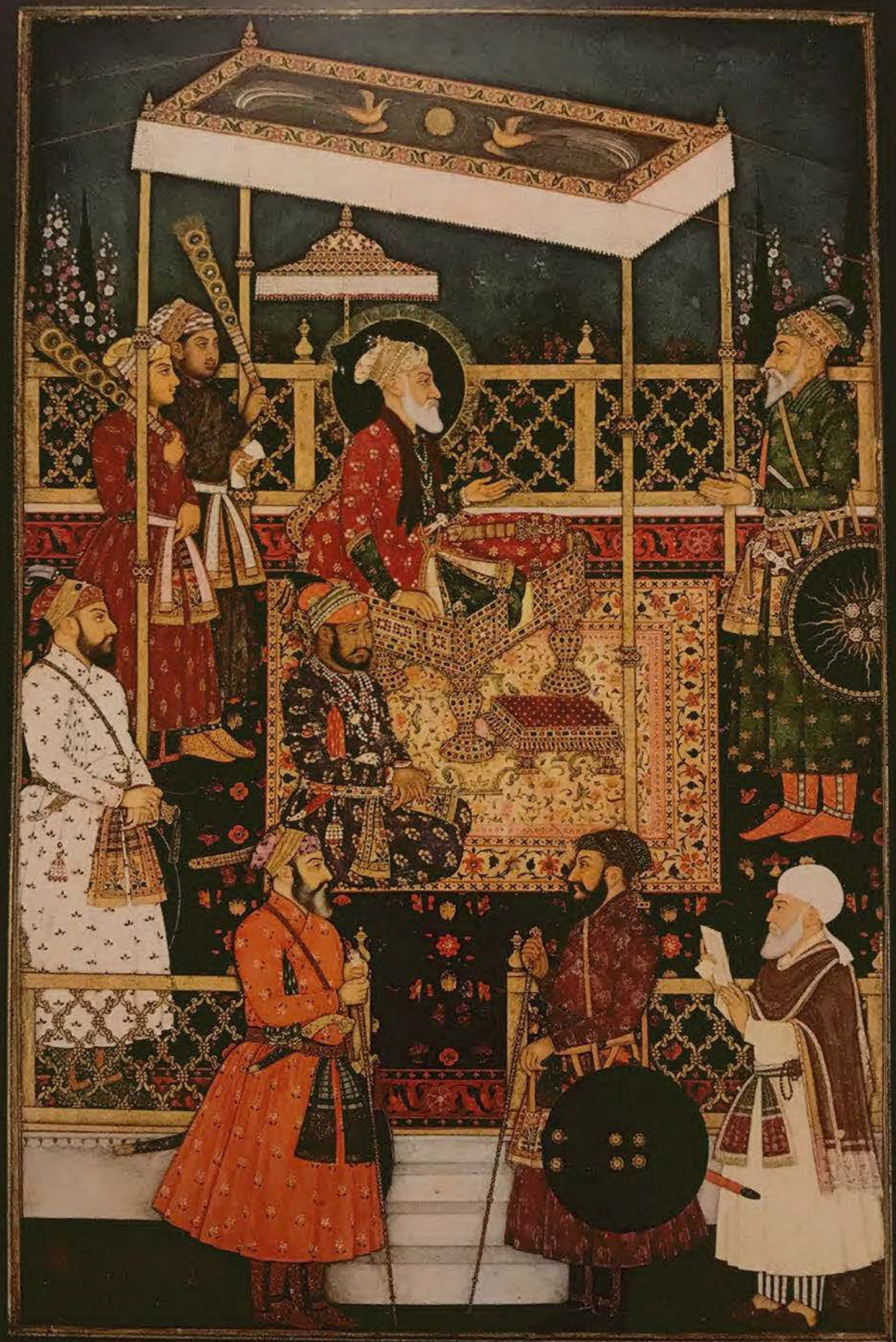
the manifold ills inflicted during his father's reign as swiftly as possible in order for the Sikhs to remain at peace in his dominions. But the new emperor was as feeble as his father was zealous; he vacillated over dispensing justice in Sirhind and punishing the persecutors of innocent Hindus.<sup>11</sup> The weak-hearted Bahadur Shah denied the Guru justice, leaving him with no option but to revert to his previous policy of armed resistance. The Guru would dispense his own form of justice by unleashing his faithful warriors on the Mughal regime and bring about its demise.

It was a steely Guru who planned a mission to attack the accursed city of Sirhind and avenge the death of his youngest sons. The operation was to be overseen by Akali Binod Singh Nihang (d. 1721), a sixth-generation descendent of Guru Angad and a lifelong companion of the tenth Guru. As one of the few surviving senior warriors in the Guru's army, he was to head a war council of five proven Sikhs (*panj pyare*<sup>†</sup>). The other four were all leading Akali Nihangs: Binod Singh's son, Kahan Singh; Baj Singh and his younger brother Ram Singh; and Daya Singh.<sup>12</sup> "Once you are in Punjab" the Guru commanded Binod Singh,

Guru Gobind Singh travelling through Rajasthan en route to the Deccan. The Akali Nihang Singh carries his battle standard.

† This institution is based on the ancient body of the *panchayat*, or council, common to Indian villages since ancient times.







"kill the Turks and the Hill Rajas. Ruin them and snatch away their kingdoms. From saddle to saddle, the Khalsa are to become rulers."<sup>13</sup> The Guru selected the recently recruited Madho Das, the fiery Bairagi sadhu, as the field commander (*bakshi*)<sup>14</sup> of the Khalsa troops. Aside from his own band of Bairagi warriors and extensive connections with other armed Hindu ascetics in the akharas of northern India, this fighting-ascetic brought with him a great deal more experience of the battlefield than the surviving members of the Khalsa. In recognition of his abilities as an experienced military leader, the Guru bestowed on him the honorary title of "Bahadur".<sup>†</sup> The five members of the council were to act as Banda Bahadur's closest advisors, and to keep a check on his behaviour and conduct to ensure he acted in the best interests of the Khalsa.

Banda was reluctant to lead such an important and dangerous mission without the Guru's physical presence, but the Guru promised he would receive the mystical assistance of "thousands and lakhs<sup>‡</sup> of Akalees."<sup>15</sup> The Guru said to Banda, "O brother, protect the Seikhs of the Gooroo and kill the wicked Mahammedans and you should keep yourself pure and meet the Khalsa with Pahool ceremony.<sup>§</sup> If you will please the Khalsa, you will obtain your desire. When we will occupy all the territory we shall possess greater glory than anyone else."<sup>16</sup>

Before departing for the north, the Guru gave the war party clear guidance in a final prayer to the Immortal Being, Akal Purakh. They were destined to become masters of their own lands:

Let there be a gathering of 900,000 fine mounted Iraqi steeds, 100,000 tents, and 125,000 elephants. Grant me this desire. Let my special guard lead, with lances in hand, carrying a hundred thousand standards. May Vaheguru's Khalsa conquer all enemies on the battlefield. I, your servant, Gobind, have sung your praises for the sake of the gathering of my disciples for the fulfilment of this desire.<sup>17</sup>

He commanded his warriors to "establish kingdoms stretching over the lands covered from sunrise to sunset."<sup>18</sup> The Guru then reminded the Akali Nihangs and Banda of the simple philosophy that would ensure their success. It was

The elderly Emperor Aurangzeb formally receives his second son, Prince Mu'azzam, who would later succeed him to become Emperor Bahadur Shah.

† "Bahadur", a hero, or champion, was conferred as a title of honour by the Mughal emperor and by other native princes. It was also applied to slaves in Persia.

‡ A unit of 100,000.

§ Khanda-pahul: the initiation of the double-edge sword that was taken by Sikhs to become Singhs of the Khalsa. It was first introduced by Guru Gobind Singh in 1699 at Anandpur.

Guru Gobind Singh and his princely sons: (from left to right) Sahibzadas Ajit Singh, Jujhar Singh, Zorawar Singh and Fateh Singh.



encapsulated in a terse formula, “deg<sup>†</sup> tegh<sup>‡</sup> fatch”. The *deg<sup>†</sup>* represented both the cauldron of *sukha<sup>‡</sup>* that nourished the Singh warriors, and the cauldron of free food served in the *langar<sup>§</sup>* to nurture the poor and hungry. The *tegh* was the sword with which they were to defend dharam and destroy its opponents who sought to rob, plunder, dishonour, and harm the populace of Hindustan. By thus strengthening its ranks by recruiting from amongst those poor Muslims, Hindus or Sikhs who had been nurtured with the cauldron and defended with the sword, the Khalsa would gain the *fateh* or victory.



Little did anyone suspect that Guru Gobind Singh was intent on spending his final days at Nanded. His desire to finally leave behind the transient world stemmed from a sense of unwavering duty. He felt his work was done and that his Khalsa, the body of loyal Sikhs formerly recognised in 1699, each of whom had each pledged their head to him alone, needed to forge its own path:

When the foundation of establishing dharam and elevating the saints had

† A large cauldron.

‡ Sukha (literally “comfort giver”) is the name given to the Sikh warrior’s traditional consecrated drink. It is made by grounding almonds, black pepper, cardamom seeds, leaves of cannabis and other ingredients in a stone mortar known as *sunera* (“beautiful one”) with a wooden pestle (*salotar*). On extracting the juices they are mixed with a combination of water and milk to produce *shabeedi deg* (martyrs drink). Sugar may also be added to sweeten the deg of sukha; in this case, it is dedicated to Hindu Sikh martyrs. If unsweetened, it is known as *mureedi deg* and is dedicated to the loyal Muslims who died fighting for the Guru’s cause. It is still consecrated daily at Hazoor Sahib (see volume II for more details).

§ Langar (literally “anchor”) refers to the communal kitchen established for travellers and strangers generally.





been fully laid, the Guru desired to make his body vanish, just as Krishna had employed the excuse of the bird hunter to forsake his life.<sup>19</sup>

Thus, it was for the sake of the Khalsa that the Guru deliberately invited his end by coaxing a young Pathan, Gul Khan, to stab him with a dagger. A frequent visitor to the Guru's camp at Nanded, he was the grandson of the warrior Painde Khan who was killed in battle by Guru Hargobind.<sup>20</sup> Unaware of his family's connection with that of the Guru's, he was shocked when he finally learned of the tragic history. Late one night in 1708, the Guru coerced him to avenge his grandfather's death. Goaded by these deliberate taunts, Gul Khan attacked with a *peshkabz* dagger after the Guru had retired to bed. Half asleep, the Guru instinctively drew his naked sword from under his pillow and slew his assailant but not before he himself was wounded.<sup>21</sup> Skilled surgeons sent by Bahadur Shah (then near Bidar en route to Hyderabad) treated the Guru's injuries. The stitched wound was seemingly on the mend but the Guru's deliberate actions had initiated a sequence of unstoppable events.

Some days later, the Guru was relaxing on the banks of the Godavari at the place now known as Nagina Ghat.<sup>†</sup> A Maratha warrior approached him to obtain proof of his much-lauded martial prowess. As a challenge, he handed his formidable steel bow to the Guru for him to string and fire. The Guru smiled as he took hold of the bow. Since the stitches from the stab wound were still fresh, and the Maratha's taut bow required immense power to string and fire it, the Khalsa urged the Guru to avoid straining himself unnecessarily. He silenced them; a master archer, he strung the bow and fired an arrow with ease. As the arrow hurtled through the air, the Sikhs noticed that the imperfectly healed

† This marked the spot where Guru Gobind Singh threw a precious diamond into the Godavari. The haughty merchant who had presented it quickly learnt his lesson.

A portrait of Guru Gobind Singh armed with bow and arrow. It is believed that the original was painted during the Guru's lifetime and was once displayed at the takht in Patna. The verses adorning the borders are taken from the Guru's writings compiled in the Dasam Guru Granth Sahib.

wound had reopened and began to bleed profusely, just as they had feared.



The Guru's wound, reopened from the strain of stringing and firing the Maratha's bow, steadily worsened. Sensing his end to be near, the Guru summoned his followers one final time. He told them that the line of the personal Guru had ended and that they were to look upon the Adi Granth Sahib<sup>†</sup> and the Khalsa Panth as his spiritual and corporeal successors respectively.<sup>22</sup> "I have made you and all my followers," the Guru explained,

over to the embrace of the Immortal one; after my death, do all you people regard the book of the Granth Sahib, as your Guru; whatever you will ask, it will point out to you. If any of my disciples, be he shorn, or grow long hair, let him regard the Granth Sahib as the form of his Guru; and whatever disciple of mine has a desire to see me, let him offer up *Karah Parsad*<sup>‡</sup> to the value of a rupee and a quarter, or as much as he desire, and let him open the book of the Granth Sahib, and do obeisance, and he will obtain as much profit as if he had seen me.<sup>23</sup>

After a brief investiture ceremony, the Guru opened the Adi Guru Granth Sahib at a random page and read aloud the *hukamnama* (auspicious order). This verse would give rise to the name of the Guru's final resting place and immortalise its name for generations to come:

In the everlasting city (*abchal nagar*) of Gobind Guru,<sup>§</sup> comfort is found by contemplating the ineffable Name, O Ram. As is one's desire, so it is that one attains the goal [in that city]. The Creator himself has established this city, O Ram. The Creator himself settled this city. Attaining all comforts the [Guru's] sons, the brother Sikhs, are happy here. Singing the virtues of

† This divine scripture contains the devotional writings of the first five Sikh Gurus, several Hindu and Muslim *bhagats* (saints) primarily represented by Kabir, Namdev, Jaidev, Ramanand, and Sheikh Farid, and the compositions of the *bhatts* (bards) such as Bhikhan, Kalh and Jalap, who, since the days of Guru Amar Das, sang the praises and the unity of spirit of the Sikh Gurus, likening them to the sanatan Hindu avatars.

‡ A consecrated sweet made of equal quantities of flour cooked brown in clarified butter to which is then added water and sugar.

§ This is not a reference to the tenth Guru. "Gobind" here means the nurturer of the world, the Creator.







the Complete Master their work [in life] is successful. The Master himself is their master and guardian. He is their father and mother. Says Nanak, he is a sacrifice to his True Guru who beautifies this city.<sup>24</sup>

By thus consulting the Adi Guru Granth Sahib the authority to make decisions affecting the Khalsa Panth were to be taken by a discerning assembly of loyal Sikhs, the Khalsa. From this point on, no individual would be considered the Guru of the Sikhs; instead, the Granth-Panth combined was to be the sole Guru of the Sikhs.<sup>†</sup>

There was good reason why the Guru had taken this important decision. In his own lifetime, the *masands*, agents appointed by the Guru to guide the distant Sikh sangats, had become extremely corrupt; many of them sought to break away from the Guru and establish their own followings as independent gurus. As a reward for their folly the office was abolished and those guilty of harming the Sikhs were executed in 1698 by the Guru's order.

From that point on, the entire Sikh community was to avoid all contact with the masands and instead establish a direct relationship with their Guru. Authority previously exercised by individual masands was assumed corporately by the sangats, now referred to as the Guru's "Khalsa".<sup>‡</sup> The term was not a new one; under Guru Hargobind and Guru Tegh Bahadur it represented those sangats who had been initiated personally by them.<sup>25</sup> Those who pledged allegiance to the Guru were to come to his presence fully armed, bringing their offerings in person. They were then honoured as the Guru's own or Khalsa Sikhs.

"It was for this reason," the Guru explained to the Sikhs at Nanded, "that the masands had to be rooted out, for had this not been done each would have set himself up as a Guru. The authority of the Guru is to pass to the Khalsa assembly. Its guarantee will be the divine Word of the Guru and its guardian will be Akal Purakh, the Immortal Being. Sparrows, imbued with the strength of Bhagvati [Chandi], will fell hawks. The power of the Turks will be broken."<sup>26</sup>



† Later, the Khalsa, under the command of the first Buddha Dal jathedar Akali Binod Singh Nihang, would also acknowledge the writings of Guru Gobind Singh as contained in the Dasam Guru Granth Sahib and Sarbloh Guru Granth Sahib as scriptures on par with the Adi Guru Granth Sahib.

‡ The Mughal administration used the term *khalsa* to signify a royal domain under the direct jurisdiction of the emperor as opposed to lands assigned to *jagirdars* (grantees). Revenue from khalsa lands was collected by officials directly for the imperial treasury.



It was in those final days at Hazoor Sahib that Guru Gobind Singh made it known that the denigrators of "the Nehangs, Nirmalas and Audasis, who belong to the Khalsa faith, is an infidel, and will be doomed to hell."<sup>27</sup>

This diversity within the Guru's Khalsa gave rise to the recognition of two broad divisions. One of these was the Singh-Khalsa, comprised of those Sikhs who underwent the khanda-pahul initiation ceremony, took the martial name "Singh" and were expected to abide by a strict code of conduct (*rahit maryada*) meant primarily for a warrior. Those Sikhs that had not taken this initiation formed the second division and were called the Sahajdhari-Khalsa and were free from the *rahit* of the Singhs. They were also known as the Khulasa.<sup>†</sup>

Conforming largely to a military ethos, the Singh-Khalsa mainly functioned within a hierarchical system. Its most senior-ranking element but least in number were the Akali-Nihangs.<sup>‡</sup> They embodied the complete way of life for the aspiring Sikh warrior. They had earned their station through the assiduous study of the Guru's chivalrous, spiritual, and historical traditions, as well as by serving him with distinction over many years.

Their apprentices, the Nihang Singhs, formed the vanguard of the Khalsa's army. These enthusiastic *jawans* (young men) remained in the constant company of their senior associates and rarely returned to their homes, unlike the third group, the Singhs, who formed the bulk of the Khalsa's fighting force. In times of peace, the Singhs lived at home plying their ancestral trades. When summoned they would join the Guru and adopt the dark blue Nihang uniform and fight for dharam. Afterwards, they would return to their villages and resume their normal lifestyles. All of these groups would maintain as a bare minimum the five<sup>§</sup> obligatory articles of the kshatriya known as the *panj kakkar* or five Ks: *kes*h (uncut hair); *kirpan* (sword); *kachhera* (knee-length breeches); *kara* (iron bracelet); and *kanga* (wooden comb).

Much less in number were the Nirmalas and Sewapanthis who represented the non-martial element within the Singh-Khalsa. Both *sampradayas* (orders) were established by Guru Gobind Singh and Guru Tegh Bahadur respectively and catered for the educational and spiritual needs of the martial Singh-Khalsa. The Nirmalas were Sikh intellectuals who were placed under the charge of two

† The root of Khalsa ("khalas") and Khulasa ("khulas") carry the same meaning in Persian: "pure" or "genuine."

‡ To this day, Akali Nihangs receive two portions of *karah prashad*, a consecrated sweet, in recognition of their higher rank and status.

§ Early historical evidence, however, conclusively points towards only the first three Ks—the *treh mudra* or three adornments—as being compulsory for the Singh-Khalsa.

of the Guru's closest companions, Bhai Daya Singh and Bhai Dharam Singh.<sup>28</sup> The philanthropic Sewapanthis were headed by a devoted Sikh, Bhai Khaneya Lal. In general, they lived separately from the military Singh-Khalsa in their own deras, but were always close at hand to aid and assist when required.

Within both the Nirmala and Sevapanthi orders, Sahajdhari-Khalsa Sikhs were also present.<sup>29</sup> These Khulasa Sikhs had not undergone the khanda-pahul ceremony but were nonetheless regarded by the Guru as loyal to his cause.

In his compositions written before 1699, Guru Gobind Singh conveyed the virtues of a purely spiritual Khalsa without reference to any formal Khalsa rahit.<sup>30</sup> In these writings he also professes his utter devotion to these faithful Sikhs: "my mind, my body, my wealth and even my head, everything belongs to them."<sup>31</sup> Thus, at the spiritual level, where progress is entirely dependant on the contemplation of "ineffable Name", Khulasa Sikhs and Khalsa Sikhs were on an equal footing.

Prior to 1699, there existed many Sahajdhari-Khalsa sangats that had been initiated directly by the Guru (rather than by a masand) using the more ancient charan-pahul ceremony.<sup>†</sup> Several years after introducing the first khanda-pahul initiation ceremony in 1699, the Guru explicitly referred to the Khulasa Sikh sangat<sup>‡</sup> of Patna, the city of his birth, as his Khalsa. In a hukamnama addressed to this sangat in the east, dated 6 February 1702, he wrote:

It is the command of the Guru: Bhai Mehar Chand, Karam Chand, and Dharam Chand. The Guru will protect you. Contemplate 'Guru, Guru' and your life will be transformed. You are my Khalsa... binding on weapons come to my presence so you may be exalted... Do not associate with the masands or their followers...<sup>32</sup>

The Guru honoured the Khulasa Sikhs with significant positions of trust and responsibility. Two years after a visit to Kurukshetra in 1702 during the solar eclipse, a hukamnama was issued to the Kurukshetra sangat informing them that "All the Sikhs of Vahiguru Ji should honour Mani Ram Purohit of Kurukshetra... He is the priest of the Guru ji, so is the priest of every one in the congregation. Any Sikh who will honour him shall be blessed."<sup>33</sup>

The Udasis were the most prominent Sahajdhari-Khalsa. Pressed into evacu-

† An initiation ceremony common to mendicants in which the novitiate drinks water that has been touched by the foot of his guru.

‡ None of the addressees is named "Singh" in the hukamnama, which suggests they had not been initiated by khanda-pahul and were therefore Khulasa Sikhs.



ating Anandpur in 1705, the Guru appointed Udasi Gurbaksh Das in charge of Gurdwara Sisganj at Anandpur.<sup>34</sup>

Khulasa Sikhs of the Udasi and Sewapanthi orders often functioned as spiritual guides to the Singh-Khalsa. In accordance with their spiritual status and specialist knowledge, these orders were often consulted by the Akali-Nihangs about matters non-military. Their advice on, and endorsement of, such plans was always eagerly sought. These saintly individuals were crucial in persuading the brave and bold amongst the oppressed Hindus in joining the Singh-Khalsa.<sup>35</sup> The Sewapanthis in particular were instrumental in encouraging Shi'a and Sufi Muslims to assist the Khalsa in fulfilling their mission to uphold dharam.



Before his cremation, the Guru made his final arrangements. He dismissed from service many in his retinue and asked them to return to their homes. To his most trusted aides, however, he gave special instructions that they were to carry out once his final rites were completed. One of these was Akali Santokh Singh Nihang (d. 1714). "Remain in this place and serve the deg", the Guru instructed,

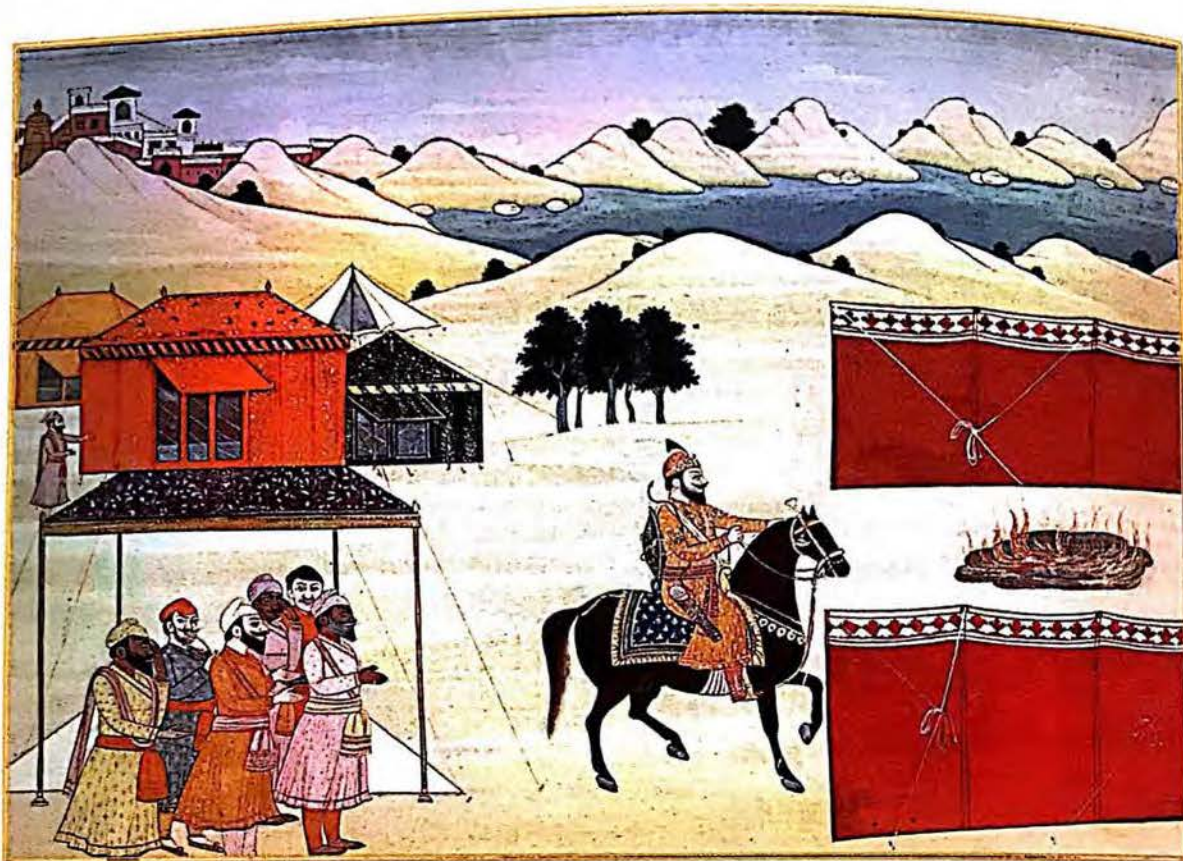
You are to keep here with you devoted Singhs. Do not employ the great wealth that will accumulate here [from the offerings of pilgrims] to build a shrine. Instead, spend it all on the deg. Have the *panchamrit*<sup>†</sup> prepared. The descendants of that person who builds a shrine will perish.<sup>36</sup>

From time-to-time, the Guru reassured him, bands of Sikhs would pass through this hallowed place with ample offerings to support him in his duty.<sup>37</sup>



On 7 October 1708, the Guru directed the building of a sandalwood pyre on the exact spot where he had performed his penance in his earlier incarnation. He ascended the pyre fully armed and sat in a trance-like state. He commanded the Sikhs to refrain from mourning and to accept what was to follow as the will of the Immortal Being. Before lighting the pyre, distraught Sikhs tried to touch his feet one last time but they were unable to do so as the Guru's body

† Another name for karah prashad made from five ingredients.



ABOVE: A fully-armed Guru Gobind Singh enters the enclosure prepared for his cremation as a group of Sikhs watch on. The Godavari and the town of Nanded can be seen in the background.

OPPOSITE: Binod Singh 'Rehirasia' holds the kard that tradition asserts was found in the ashes of the Guru's pyre.

had transformed from matter into light. The flames intensified but they did not burn the Guru, who remained composed in a meditative posture. Suddenly a mighty flame emerged from his body and engulfed the pyre. Those present were left in conflicting states of rapt bliss and overwhelming grief at their loss:

All the disciples and holy men, who had collected from all parts having uttered the words: "Jai Jai Kar (victory victory)" began to sing beautiful songs; and many, filling their eyes with tears, began to weep and lament at separation from the Guru. In all quarters, all players on the rubab<sup>†</sup> began to sound their instruments, and hundreds began to read the Granth Sahib. At that time, it appeared as if there was the rejoicing of heaven; many holy and good men becoming ascetics, withdrew at that time from worldly affairs; and many, regarding the pleasures of this world as vain and false, gave their lives along with the Guru.<sup>38</sup>

The legend later spread that the Guru in his light-form, invisible to all but a few blessed eyes, walked out of the fire, mounted his horse and ascended into the heavens on his final journey to his destination: Sach Khand, the Realm of Truth. It is said that he soared into the skies and left the Panth behind. Those

<sup>†</sup> A stringed instrument, also called a rebeck, used in the early Sikh musical tradition.





that stood below wailed but the rejoicing heavens resonated with the sounds of victory. The heavenly drums reverberated, but the people only heard a great thunder clap which rumbled away gently. A spectacular light lit up the skies, cut across by a dazzling rainbow. In the heavens, a great crowd of demigods had gathered to honour the son of Guru Tegh Bahadur whose achievements were indeed great. He had destroyed the power of the Mughals. They greeted him joyfully with shouts of "Victory to Vaheguru". Brahma, Shiva and Indra all came forward to pay their respects to Guru Gobind Singh.<sup>39</sup>

That day, an Udasi sadhu approached the mournful Sikhs at the camp. He claimed to have seen the Guru a short while earlier mounted on his horse. Their master had sent him with a message of comfort. "Do not mourn me. I am at peace so forsake your worries. Take up dharam and repeat the name of Hari." The final instruction was to revere the Singh-Khalsa form by bearing weapons (*shastar*).<sup>40</sup> When the Sikhs sifted through the pyre afterwards, the only physical remnant left of the Guru found was a small *kard* dagger. Heeding the Guru's decree, the Singhs went to the Udasi's *dharamsala*<sup>†</sup> and worshipped the weapons of war.<sup>41</sup>



When the flames of the pyre had died down, the ashes were gathered and a small mound raised on the spot where of the Guru had performed his great penance in Sat Yuga. The consecrated place was known by several names including Abchal Nagar ("Everlasting City"), Sach Khand ("Realm of Truth") and, most commonly, Sri Hazoor Sahib ("Master's Presence"). In time, it would come to be regarded as one of the four *takhts* (thrones), or seats of temporal authority

† Literally the "abode of dharam", a *dharamsala* functions as a place for instruction in dharam, refuge to the needy and a resting place for travellers.

whose orders the Sikhs were bound to accept unhesitatingly.<sup>†</sup>

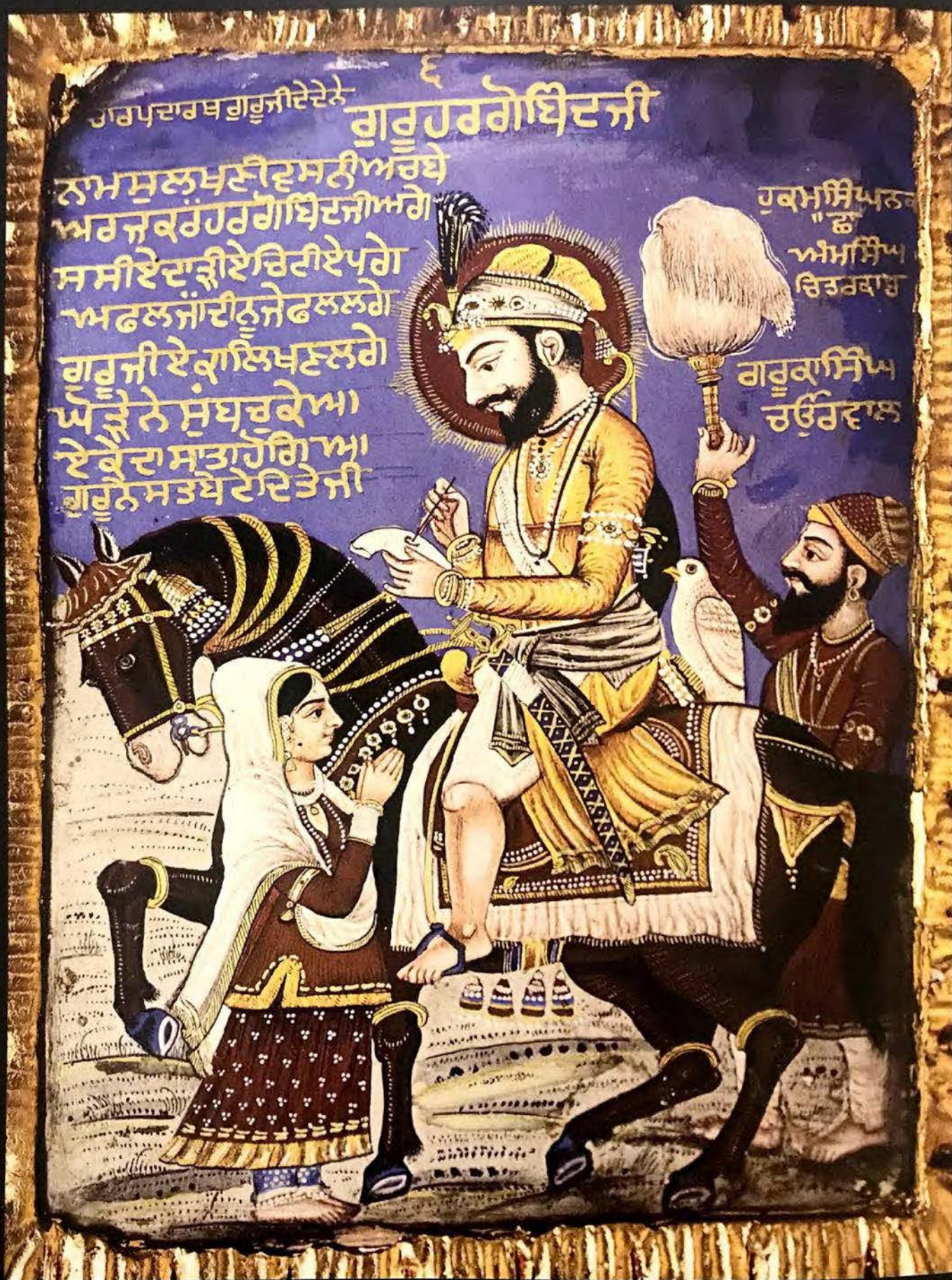
To preserve its sacred memory Santokh Singh and a small band of other Akali-Nihangs who had volunteered to remain behind with him raised an undorned stone platform (*chabootra*) over the mound. Takht Hazoor Sahib, as it was called, would become the focal point of a unique community of devotees absorbed in their master's presence.

† The other three takhts being the Akal Takht in Amritsar which was raised in 1606 by Guru Hargobind, Takht Harimandir Sahib in Patna which commemorates the birthplace of Guru Gobind Singh, and Takht Keshgarh Sahib in Anandpur where the Khalsa's military order was established in 1699.



## 2. IN THE MASTER'S SERVICE







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The presence of a small armed guard would be crucial in safeguarding both the takht and Sikh pilgrims from the occasionally hostile local Muslim populace; the Guru's presence while alive had already agitated many of them, and it was inevitable that a permanent Sikh pilgrimage centre in their midst would become the target of their attacks.

The first guardians of Hazoor Sahib were the Guru's closest associates and servants, the Akali-Nihangs, members of the most militaristic and rigid branch of the Khalsa. By the time of Guru Gobind Singh's passing, this martial-ascetic order had been in existence for just over a century. They traced their origin to shortly after the death of Guru Arjan (1563–1606), who was killed whilst in custody, under the orders of the newly installed Emperor Jahangir. Irked by the Guru's popularity amongst the masses, both Hindu and Muslim, Jahangir initially contemplated converting the "Hindu, named Arjan," to Sunni Islam. He changed his mind, however, on learning that the Guru had supported his rebellious son Khusrav in a failed succession bid; as a political enemy, the emperor gave the order for the Guru to be tortured to death.<sup>1</sup>

Guru Arjan's son and successor, Guru Hargobind (1590–1644), immediately founded the first Sikh takht, the Akal Takht ('Throne of the Immortal Being'), and rallied under his banner a standing army "for the protection of the dharam of the *Vedas*."<sup>2</sup> The original soldiers of the Akal Takht<sup>†</sup> were known as Akalis (Immortals). As Baba Buddha (1506–1631), a revered Sikh since the times of Guru Nanak, oversaw their initial training, the Guru's force carried the informal tag of 'Buddha Dal', or Baba Buddha's army. Successive Gurus were trained in the arts of war in the ranks of this army, which soon grew to 2,200 well-equipped Akali horsemen.

During Guru Hargobind's tenure the Buddha Dal fought and won four costly battles against the Mughal forces of Shah Jahan. Under Guru Har Rai (1630–1661), they were poised in 1658 to assist Shah Jahan's eldest son, Prince Dara Shikoh (1615–1659) in his doomed struggle for succession against his youngest brother, Prince Aurangzeb. Guru Tegh Bahadur (1621–1675) toured widely in the eastern provinces with the warriors of the Buddha Dal.<sup>3</sup> At the behest of the Kashmiri Brahmins, he raised his voice against the injustice of Aurangzeb's officers who were forcefully converting their community to Sunni Islam. His intervention to protect Hindu dharam, coupled with the fact that the general populace revered the Guru with the honorific *sacha patshah* (true emperor), fired Aurangzeb with jealousy. After failing to secure the Guru's

Guru Hargobind fulfils the wishes of a devotee in this mural in Hazoor Sahib.

<sup>†</sup> It was also known as the Akal Bunga.

conversion, he ordered his execution with extreme tortures in 1675.

Guru Tegh Bahadur's young son, Guru Gobind Das, set to work to overthrow the Mughal Empire. In the 1680s, he recast the Buddha Dal into an army of *nihangs* ("reckless crocodiles") and, broadly speaking, introduced two distinct ranks: the higher ranking and more experienced warriors were to keep the designation 'Akali' and became 'Akali Nihangs'; those below them, including new recruits, were known simply as 'Nihangs'. Later, this distinction would be marked by a length of cloth protruding from the tops of the turbans worn by the Akali Nihangs to represent the Khalsa's battle standard (*farla* or *farrara*); this signified their pledge to sacrifice their heads before ever letting their standard fall to the ground. As the Guru's constant companions, the troops of Nihangs and Akali Nihangs who served in the Buddha Dal received the privilege of being called the Guru's "Beloved Armies." They had earned repute as his most devout followers, the chosen guardians of the tenets of the mystical body of the Khalsa. Fearless warriors who shunned all forms of bodily comfort, the Sikhs hailed these "Nihang Bhujangi<sup>†</sup> Shaheeds<sup>‡</sup>".<sup>4</sup>

Shortly after the Khalsa was formally recognised in 1699, Guru Gobind Singh (as he came to be known) issued special orders for the Akali-Nihangs to disperse and initiate others into the Khalsa army. From Anandpur he sent batches of five Singhs, holding clubs in their hands and carrying double-edged khanda sword in their baldrics, in all four directions.

They were sent south, east, north, and even to the heart of the west [towards Muslim countries]. To Amritsar and Patna, wherever was the Gurus' abode... First the Guru sent the Bhujangis towards Majha where they settled near Guru Chak<sup>§</sup> and initiated others. Like this there was a great increase in the Panth of the Bhujangi Nihangs.<sup>5</sup>

Flamboyant, self-confident and brimming with a peculiar vitality, these warriors were styled *Shiv-saroop Maha-Kali*<sup>¶</sup> Singhs by their tenth master.<sup>6</sup> They worshipped their weapons, especially those made of steel. In their swords, battle-axes, bows, spears and quoits, they recognized the personified form of Maha-Kal (Great Death) and its *shakti* (power) revered as Chandi.<sup>7</sup> As 'men of steel' they

† A term used to describe an adept Akali Nihang warrior who moved snake-like in the battlefield.

‡ Literally "martyrs".

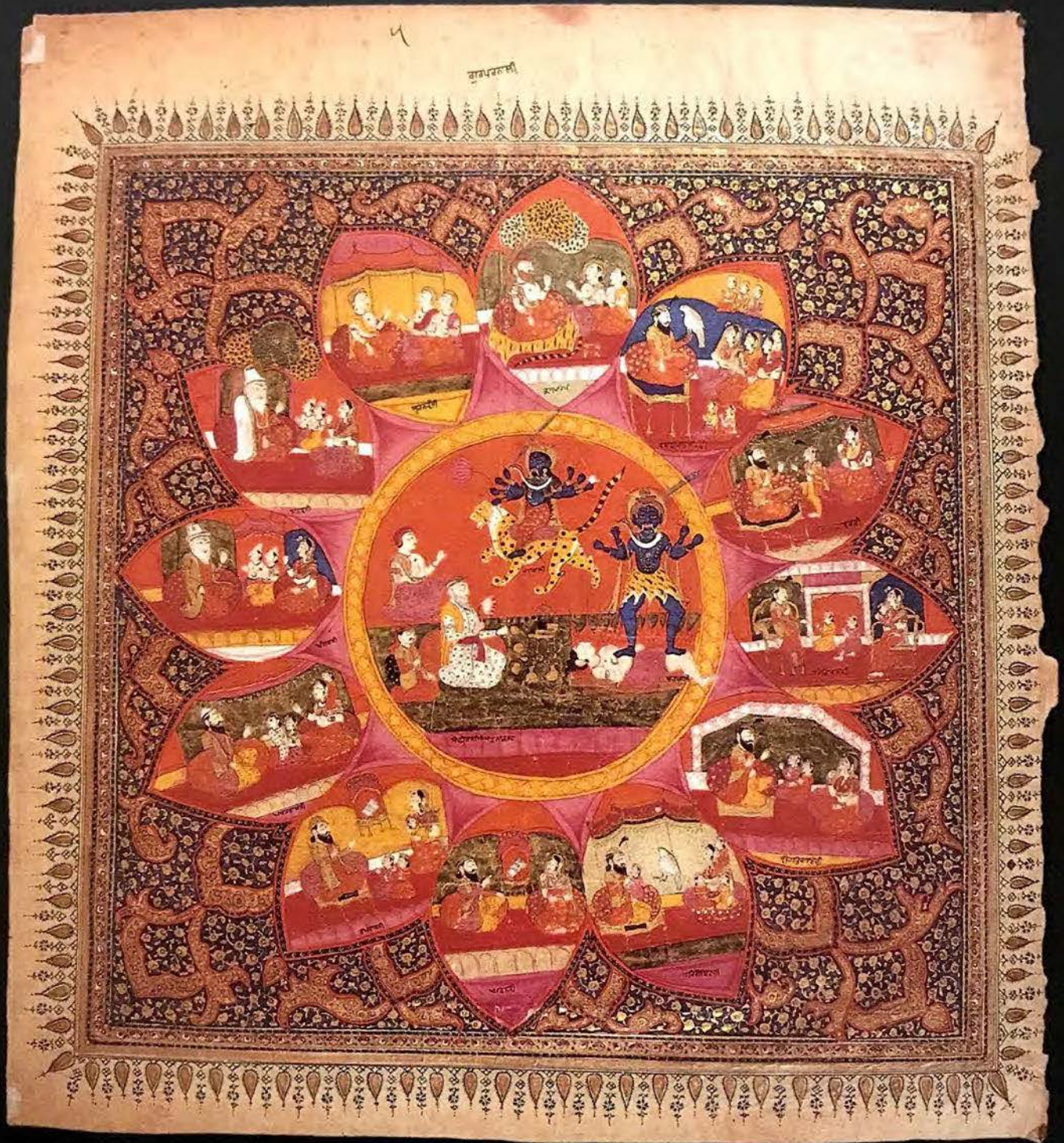
§ The original name of Amritsar.

¶ Shiva's form as Maha-Kal or Great Death.













OPPOSITE: This twelve-petalled 'cosmic lotus' shows at its centre Sodhi Bhan Singh worshipping Maha-Kal and Maha-Kali. The Sikh Gurus with their wives, children and followers, are shown in ten petals, while two others depict ancestral figures in the Sodhi's guru-lineage, Surajbans and Kashyap Rishi. This loose folio, painted by Miha Singh of Kashmir, was probably once appended to an Adi Guru Granth Sahib manuscript commissioned by the Sodhi around 1839–1843.

In Guru Gobind Singh's martial compositions, Maha-Kal and Maha-Kali (Chandi) are the personified forms of the khanda and tulwar respectively. These personifications are transmuted into devastating combat styles (both armed and unarmed) in the traditional Sikh fighting arts, shastar vidya. Hence, whereas devotees not connected with this martial tradition might contemplate and interpret the imagery shown in this folio as being connected with idol worship, Guru Gobind Singh taught his Singh-Khalsa to shun such worship and instead to recognise, understand and apply these visualised forms in the context of enhancing their martial training and battlefield effectiveness.

LEFT: Guru Gobind Singh's bifurcated khanda with serrated edge and Guru Tegh Bahadur's tulwar in the collection of the Patiala royal family. Drawn by Brij Mohan Lal, c. 1905. The khanda was a gift to the nawab of Malerkotla in recognition of the Muslim ruler's refusal to carry out the execution of the Guru's sons.





An Udasī sadhu, c. 1840.

were destined to uphold dharam in Kal Yuga as exemplified by their illustrious Kshatriya ancestors in previous ages; indeed, Guru Gobind Singh traced his own lineage back to the Solar dynasty of Ram Chandar.<sup>8</sup>

As the vanguard of the Khalsa armies, the Akali-Nihangs played a leading role in the battles against the hill chiefs and the Mughal governors who persecuted the Guru and his Sikhs. Under the Guru's aegis, the Akali-Nihangs modelled their itinerant lifestyle on the most exalted "universal kshatriya monarch" of ancient times, the *chakravarti raja*, whose chariot wheels rolled over the land uncontested. It was in this tradition that the Buddha Dal would eventually undertake its special duty as the *chakravarti panjva takht* or the itinerant fifth throne, to uphold a strict adherence to the well-defined *maryada* (tradition) in Sikh places of worship.



The Akali-Nihangs were not alone in serving pilgrims at Hazoor Sahib. A venerable Udasī sadhu, Mahant Ishar Das, who was present at the time of the Guru Gobind Singh's cremation, shared the responsibility of overseeing the ecclesiastical aspects of the Guru's last resting place.<sup>9</sup> For the previous two centuries, untold numbers of itinerant Udasī mendicants like Ishar Das had traced Guru Nanak's footsteps into the farthest reaches of the subcontinent, carrying his harmonious message in their melodious voices and beguiling manners.

These wandering ascetics lived a life of detachment and privation. Between halts at places of pilgrimage they drifted wherever their whim carried them, without shelter day or night, trusting to charity for support, and fasting if alms



were not forthcoming. They were very often entirely naked, save for the wood ashes smeared from head to foot as protection against insect bites, the intensely hot summers and the bracingly cold winters. Some shaved their heads while most others maintained their locks tied in a knot on the crown of the head, matted and uncombed. When they weren't singing or reciting the *shabads*<sup>†</sup> of Guru Nanak or the *matras*<sup>‡</sup> of his beloved son, Baba Sri Chand,<sup>10</sup> they maintained a vow of silence, thus forbidding themselves from begging. They deliberately owned no property whatever, not even brass cooking pots or drinking vessels; they carried only a cup made of a gourd, and depended on charitable people either for cooked food, or for the means of cooking the flour and other ingredients given to them. It was for these reasons that an Udasi sadhu was

often a welcome guest in Sikh or Hindoo villages or families, reciting his sacred texts, or telling to the wondering ears of listening matrons and children marvellous scenes of large religious fairs and gatherings, of gorgeous Hindoo or Sikh ceremonies, and his own personal adventures.<sup>11</sup>

In the seventeenth century, Guru Nanak's successors assigned special missionary duties, known as *bakshish* (lit. "bounty") to six Udasi sadhus: the seventh Guru, Har Rai, appointed Baba Suthra Shah, Sangat Sahib and Bhakta Bhagwan; the ninth Guru, Tegh Bahadur, appointed Mihan Shah; and Guru Gobind Singh appointed Jit Mal and Bakhat Mal.<sup>12</sup> Each was gifted certain marks of distinction: a *seli topi* (woollen cord hat); a red-, white- or ochre-coloured *chola* (hermit's gown) if they chose to wear it; and a *nagara* (kettle drum) to signal the passing of the day to the beat of the drum.

Those that had rediscovered places visited by Guru Nanak set down the smouldering embers of their hearths (*dhuan*) and established Udasi centres. In these *deras*, *sangats*, *muths*, *akharas*, *dharamsalas* and *bungas*,<sup>§</sup> free lodging and food were provided to other itinerant holy men and weary travellers.

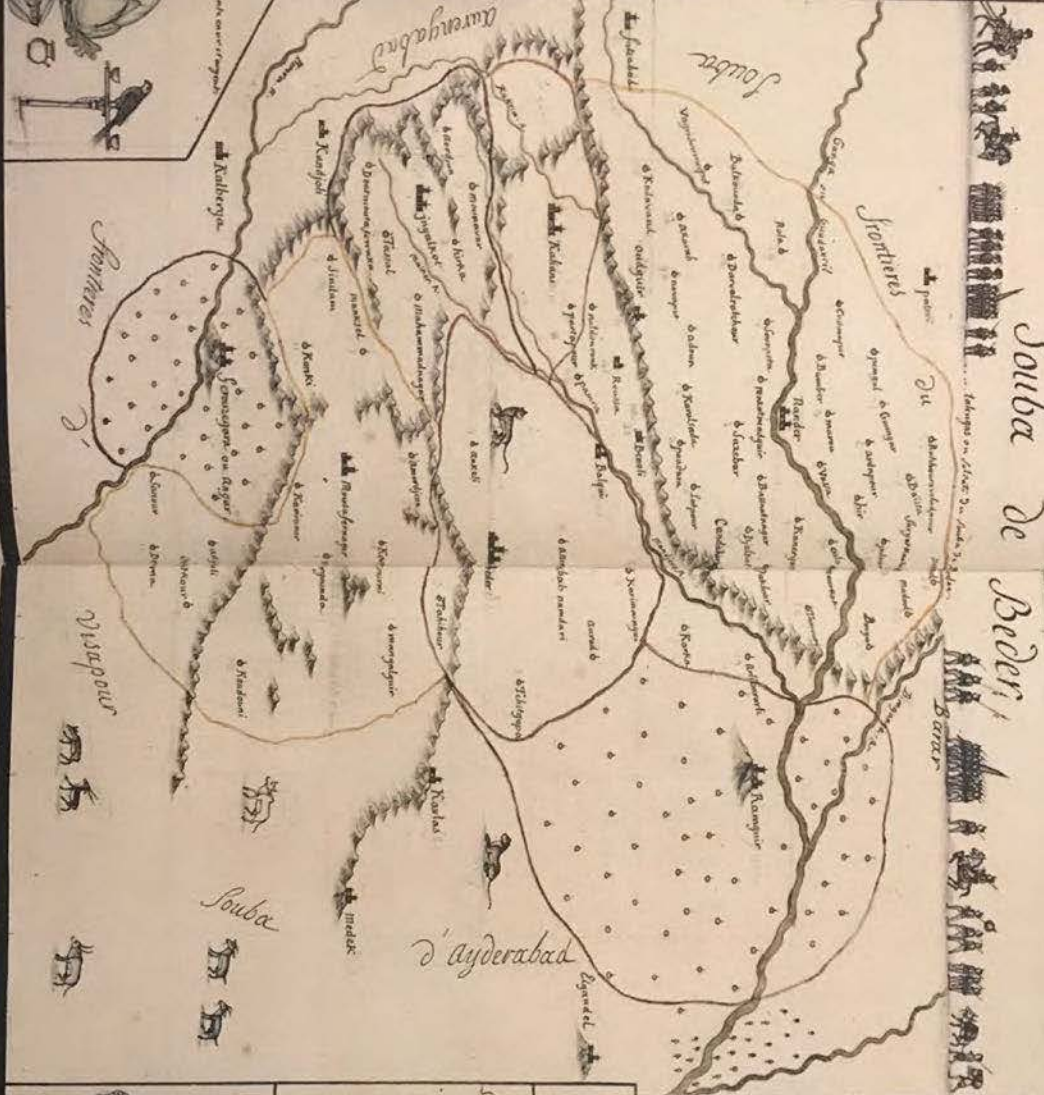
These centres were also seminaries of learning where they dispensed spiritual and secular instruction. The mahant was the head of these colleges and his disciples (*chelas*) were given boarding and lodging. The curriculum was versatile

† Poetic spiritual compositions found in the Adi Guru Granth Sahib.

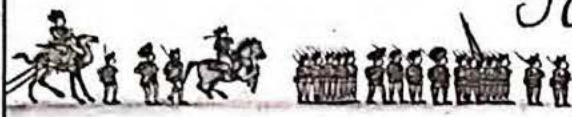
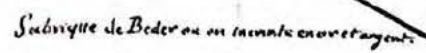
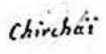
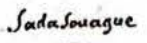
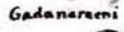
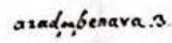
‡ These are sacred mantras containing the teachings of Baba Sri Chand.

§ A dera is an ascetic base camp; a sangat is a congregation; a muth is a monastery; an akhara is an arena, or an assemblage of sadhus belonging to a particular order; a dharamsala is a place of instruction in dharam, a refuge for the needy or resting place for travellers; a bunga is a rest house or a place of dwelling.

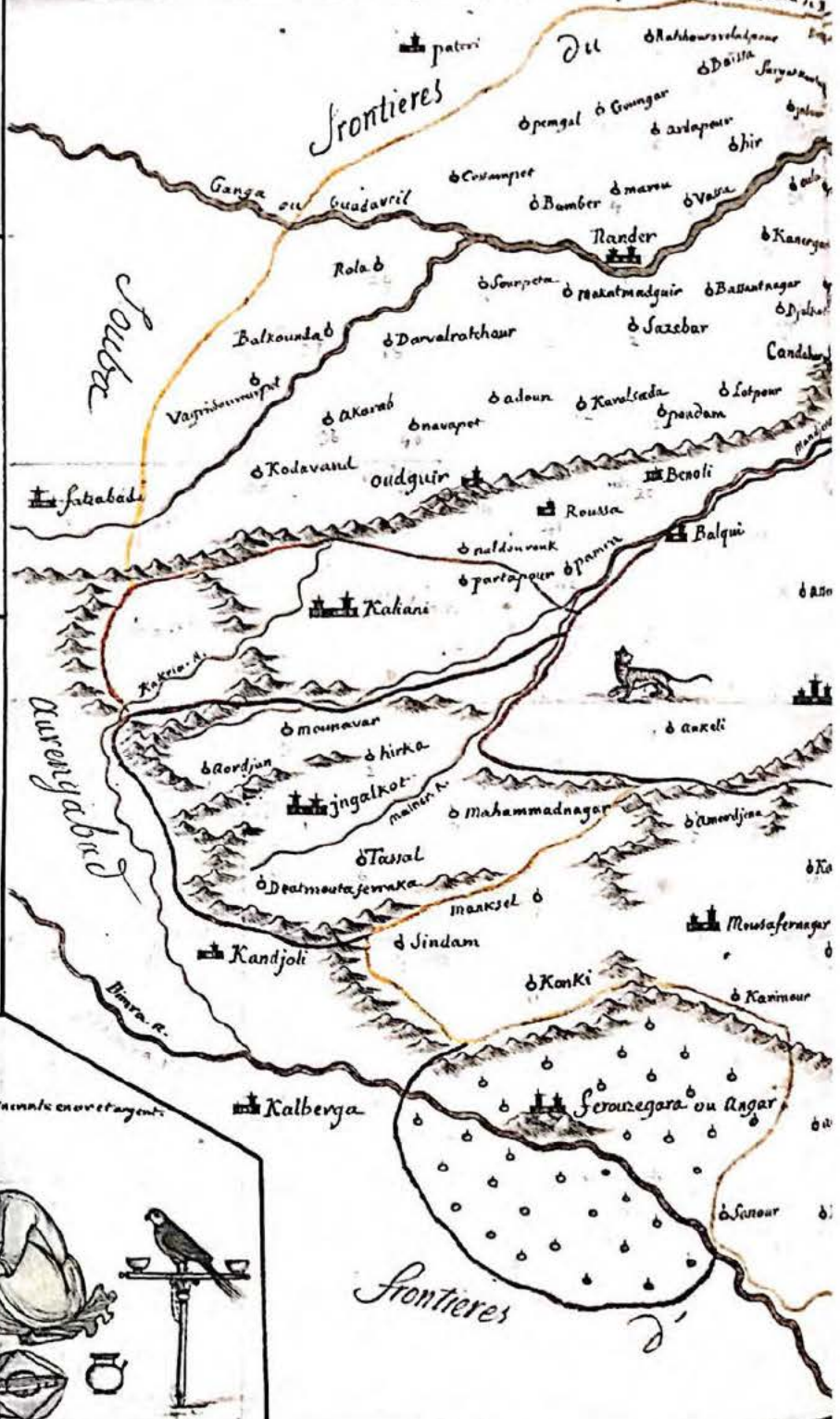
Souba de Beberij







...talengas en solcati de la strada...





Barar

*nakechandi*

*Tchistia*

*madaria*

*Dichelia*

Sourvardia

And: 1

*Vales inclusés.*



PREVIOUS: The province of Bidar, c. 1770. Nanded town (spelt "Nander") is situated on the northern bank of the River Godavari, which has been coloured gold and runs across the top of the map. This map is taken from an illustrated manuscript describing twenty-one subas or provinces of the Mughal Empire. The work was commissioned by Colonel Jean Baptiste Joseph Gentil (1726-1799), a French military officer, when he was living in Faizabad, Avadh.

OPPOSITE: Guru Gobind Singh's steel battle standard, the asht-bhuja dhuja. The eight limbs are counted as the six prongs of the tridents (*trisul*) plus the two "naked teeth" (*ugardanti*) protruding from its top.

and broad. Students were instructed in the science of classical vocal and instrumental music (*rag vidya*), the deeper meanings of the classical devotional texts and treatises (*shabad-arth te visthar*), the intricacies of diagnosing ailments and dispensing traditional cures (*ayurved*), the science of weapons (*shastar vidya*) and the art of debate and discourse (*tark-nijaj*<sup>†</sup>). Gurmukhi, Sanskrit, Vedant,<sup>‡</sup> grammar, prosody, rhetorics and calligraphy also featured on the curriculum. The Udasi masters made extensive use of parable, allegory and metaphor to encourage their disciples to gain an inner knowledge of themselves in their quest for the Truth.

As centres of learning and charity, many of these establishments were patronised by rulers, irrespective of their own sectarian beliefs. Indeed, even during the later reign of the puritanical Aurangzeb, a land grant (*dharamarth jagir*) was made in favour of the akhara of the Udasi saint, Bhai Sangat Sahib for its upkeep.<sup>13</sup>

As was the case in many other Sikh shrines all over India, the contribution of the Udasis and Akali-Nihangs over the following century would see the establishment of Hazoor Sahib develop into a magnificent military encampment and college to sustain the Sikhs as a "race of warriors and students."<sup>14</sup>



As Guru Gobind Singh had predicted, Akali Santokh Singh Nihang received many pilgrims at Hazoor Sahib. Two of the earliest visitors were Gurbaksh Singh and Gajgah<sup>§</sup> Singh, Akali Nihangs from Punjab who also made the first contributions to the structural development of the sacred site.

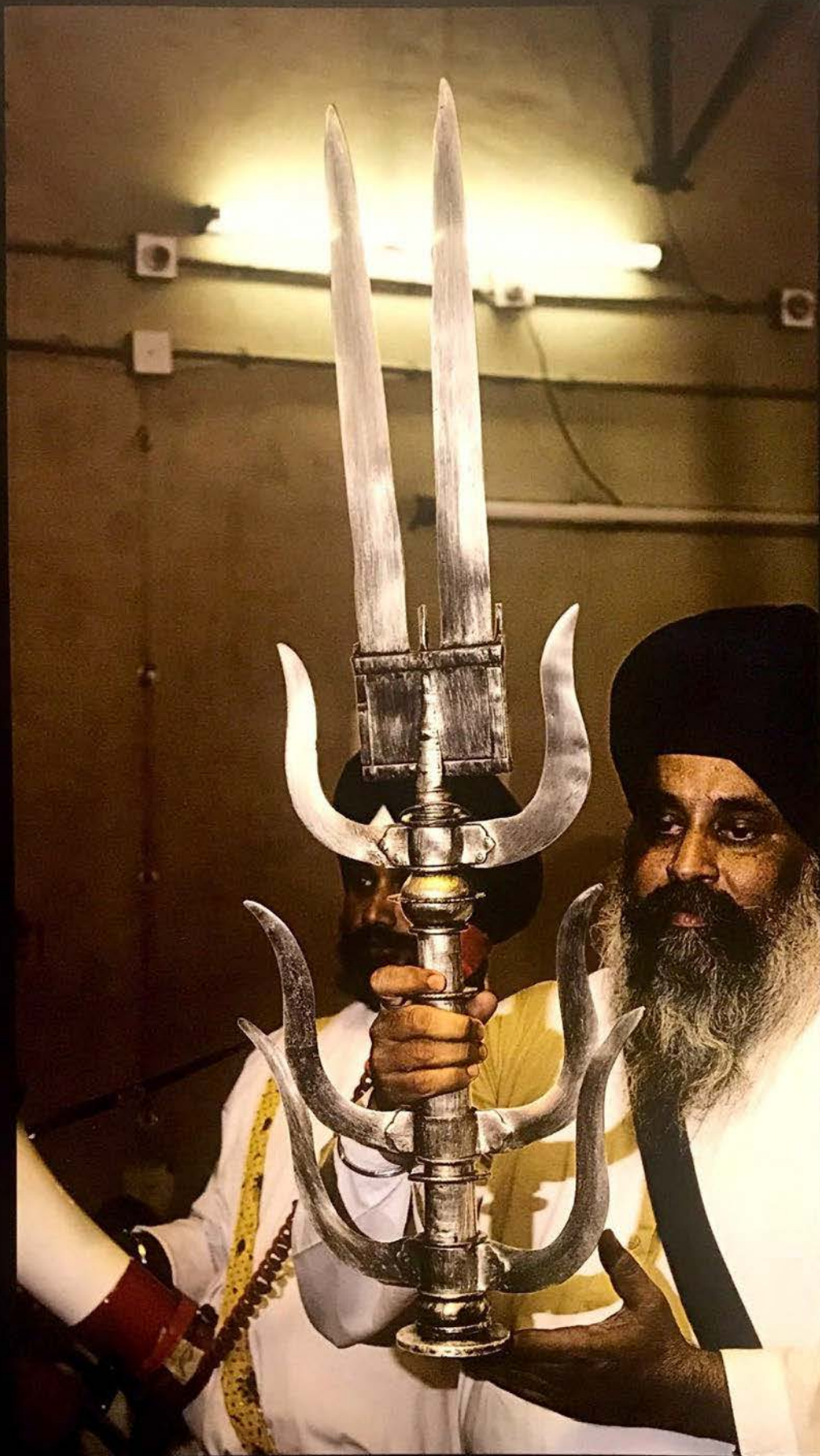
After hearing news of the Guru's death, they and their small *jatha* (party) of Akali-Nihangs headed southwards towards Hazoor Sahib and reached there in 1709. Within a short time of arriving, these Singhs had two wells dug to secure a supply of water for bathing and drinking, one near the takht, and the other a little further away towards the Godavari. They had initially made use of the ghats<sup>¶</sup> on the banks of the river for water but the almost daily risk of ambush by local Muslims forced them to sink the wells nearer to their base camp.<sup>15</sup>

† The study of reasoning and logic respectively.

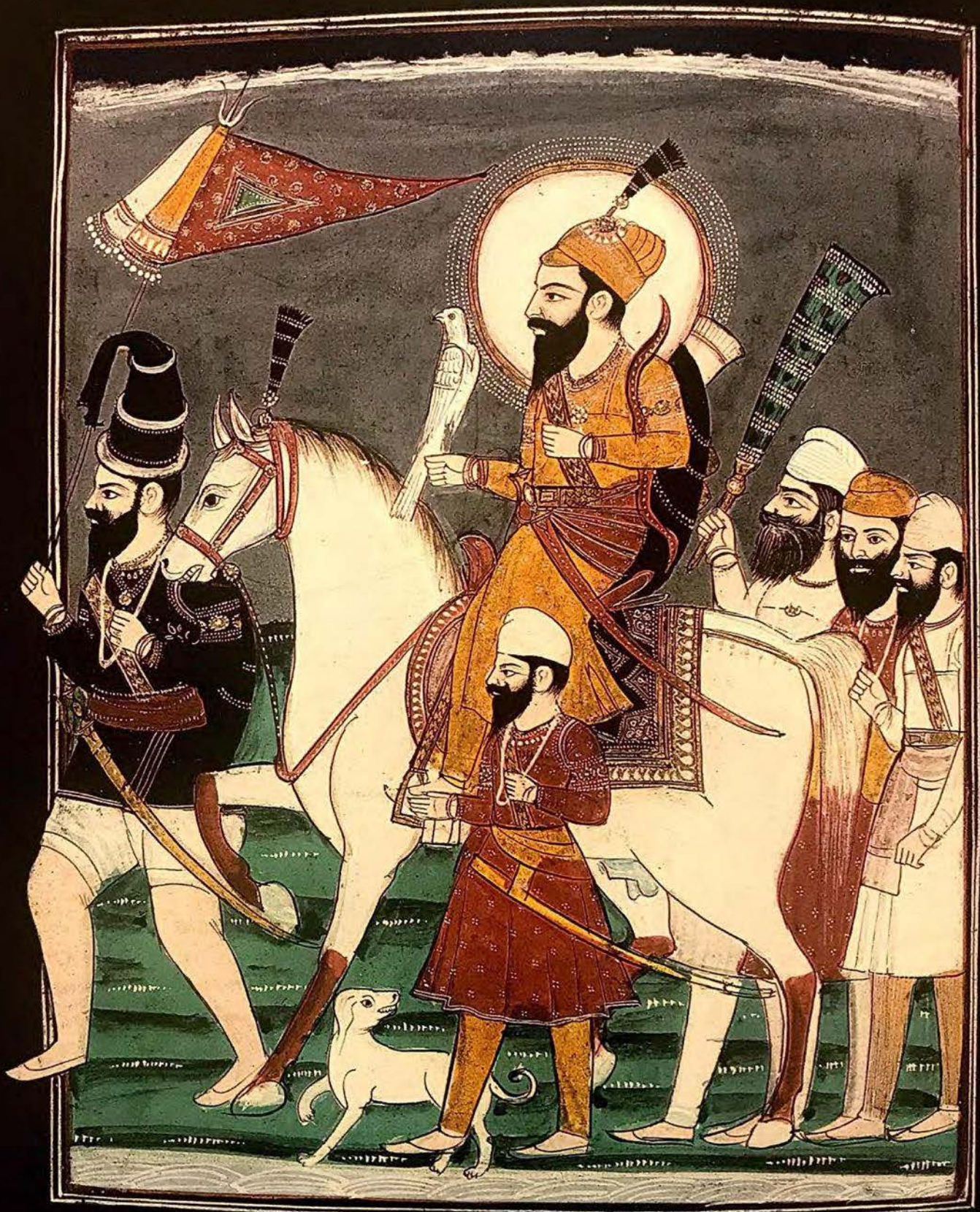
‡ One of the six main schools of Hindu philosophy in which the teachings implicit in the Vedas are expounded upon.

§ Since Gurbaksh Singh shared his name with another trooper in his contingent, he took to being called Gajgah Singh, after the distinctive emblem he wore on his peaked turban.

¶ A stairway leading down to a landing on the water.









They cleared a large area around the sacred platform and took the precaution of fencing the perimeter with thorny bushes to afford protection against wild beasts and surprise attacks by the locals. They then began building from mud bricks the *sanctum sanctorum* that enshrined the fourth takht or Sikh throne of authority. They placed the Guru's weapons on the takht and worshipped them. Access to this edifice was only granted to a designated individual selected from among the small colony who was known as the *pujari*, the one who conducted the daily worship (*puja*).

The following year saw further improvements to the takht structure. Mela Singh and his jatha of thirty Singhs took one look at the unpretentious appearance of the place, dotted as it was with the tents and desolate huts put up by the original Akali-Nihang settlers, and decided to construct a building around the sanctum sanctorum. This outer shrine, also made from mud bricks, formed a surrounding circumbulatory path around the inner edifice that was accessible to all worshippers. Mela Singh acquired building materials to the value of a thousand rupees and set the Akali-Nihangs to work. Those involved in the labour knew that the Guru had uttered a curse against anyone who raised a shrine in his memory, but these practising celibates, having no descendants to worry about, proceeded with their project as an act of devotion.<sup>16</sup>

This early structure was an austere, single-storey affair possessing the minimum of architectural adornment. Worship within its walls was directed mainly towards the Guru's personal weapons placed in an elevated position on the takht. Upon a sacred bedstead, the Manji Sahib, situated in front of the takht was placed the Adi Guru Granth Sahib.<sup>†</sup> This was the manuscript copy that Guru Gobind Singh had inaugurated as the Sikhs' eternal spiritual Guru. Whereas the Udasis took responsibility for reciting from the Adi Guru Granth Sahib, the Akali-Nihangs conducted the worship of the weapons.<sup>‡</sup>

Weapons had always received an eminent status in the Guru's court. In his "Shastar Nam Mala Puran", a poetic rosary of the names of weapons, Guru Gobind Singh explicitly honoured them as his *pir*, or spiritual guide: "The *uss*, *kirpan*, *khando* and *kharag* swords, the matchlock gun, the arrow, the *saif* and *sirohi* swords, and the javelin, these are my *pir*."<sup>17</sup> When the Guru instructed his wife, Mata Sahib Devan, to leave Nanded for Delhi, she pleaded with him

Guru Gobind Singh attended by five Singh-Khalsa. The distinctively attired Akali Nihang carries a trident standard similar to the asht-bhuja dhruja at Hazoor Sahib.

† Manji Sahib can also be applied to a takht since it a term used to denote the seat of the Guru.

‡ These practices mirrored those established in 1706 at the Akal Takht, Amritsar, by Akali Mani Singh Nihang. Fulfilling the tenth Guru's command, he arrested control of the takht and the Harimandir Sahib from the descendents of Meharban Sodhi.



True to its wearer's martial character, this nineteenth-century Akali Nihang turban (*dastar*) was a storehouse (*bunga*) of razor-sharp steel weapons including quoits, tiger claws and miniature daggers. The prominent multi-pronged trident emblem, the *gajgah*, carries the clear imprint of the asht-bhuja dhruva.

to let her remain by his side. She had made a pledge to eat only after having had his *darshan* (blessed sight). The Guru solved the problem by laying out six of the personal weapons that had belonged to his grandfather, Guru Hargobind, in front of her. "Have my darshan in them," he advised his wife. "Look upon them when you bathe in the morning. Focus your mind upon me and look upon them. In this way, your pledge will be upheld."<sup>18</sup>

Even in the Guru's lifetime, not everyone appreciated the worth or significance of worshipping the weapons of war. Following his escape from the siege of Chamkaur in 1705, the Guru spent some time in the country inhabited by the tribe of Brar Jats. After setting up camp one day, a Jat leader, Kapura Chaudry paid the Guru a visit. Kapura had previously refused to give the fugitive Guru shelter in fear of state reprisals. On entering the camp, the worship of weapons that was taking place shocked the Jat:

The Guru sat on one bedstead and on another, bows, swords and many other weapons were being wafted with incense. Kapura noted the royal umbrella held above them. He saw another held over the head of the Compassionate One<sup>†</sup>. Seeing this spectacle, the Jat approached... Taking a seat on a bedstead, he spoke to the Guru. 'What have you done here? It may be fine to have a whisk<sup>‡</sup> waved over your head, but over arrows, bows, swords, and so on? What is this practice? The people who come and see the whisk being waved over them, they return home and laugh, asking what is all this?' The Guru replied, 'I am the Guru of the World, the entire world knows this. To worship these weapons is proper and acceptable. Consider them clearly as my Guru. O Chaudry, listen to this truth. With you, what have we seen? Fearing your enemies, you lost your home. You turned your back on your Guru and have not understood the divine mystery. From ancient times to the very end, consider this: the sword is recognised as the Primal Guru, the fierceness of which is acknowledged in the world. Through divine grace, sing the praises of the Guru-arrow. The secrets of other weapons are told in the *Dasam Granth*.<sup>§</sup> From primordial time, Kal of Kal, the Death of Death (Maha-Kal), and the goddess of the sword (Chandi), have been worshipped. With lights and incense, worship these weapons by bowing low. The mind becomes great, accomplished, and

<sup>†</sup> A reference to Guru Gobind Singh.

<sup>‡</sup> Traditionally made from the hairs of a cow's tail and waved over holy personages and sacred texts to symbolise their exalted spiritual status.

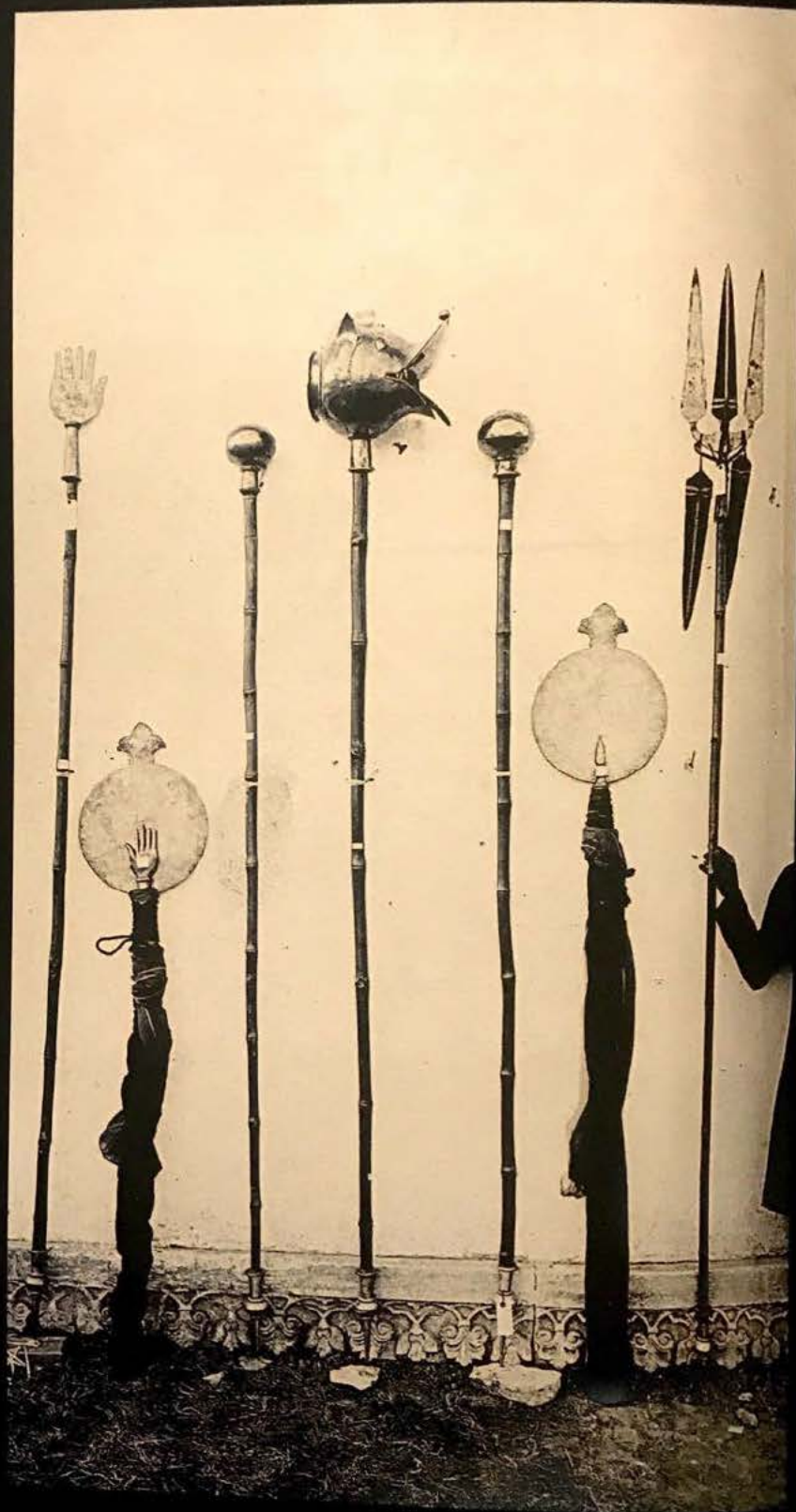
<sup>§</sup> The compiled writings of Guru Gobind Singh.





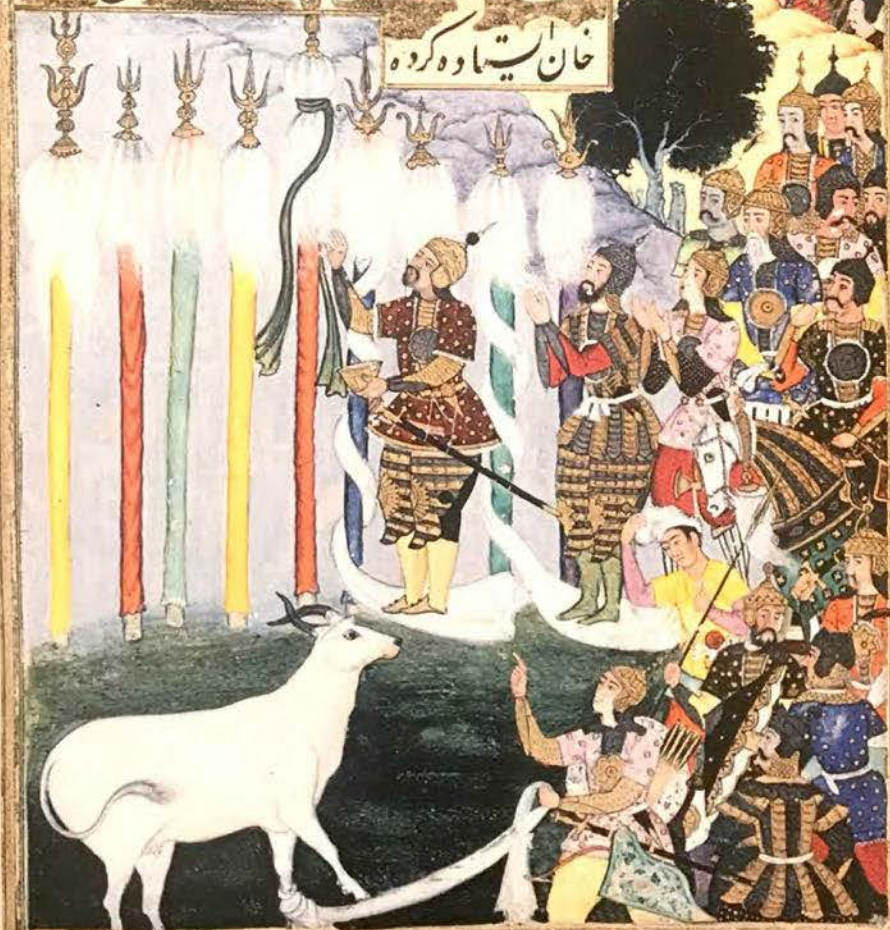
RIGHT: A selection of Mughal battle standards exhibited at Delhi, c. 1911. The three-pronged standard held up on the far right gives an appreciation of the typical size of a standard in the Guru's days.

OPPOSITE: In this illustration to the late sixteenth-century memoirs of the first Mughal emperor, Babur and his army pay homage to the battle standards in an epic ceremony. The Mughal standard heads bear a close resemblance to the Guru's standard preserved at Hazoor Sahib.





در الفاظ ترکی بموجب اقتضای محل و دال و دیگر عن قاف و کاف  
 سر کد ام پیکر مبدل مشیده اند بعد از خند و غریزی تنزل سپهر  
 آمد بجز در رسیدن این خبر خان را تا شکی لکسر کرد و در مسکن  
 و سام سرک بر انوار و جو ناریال ساخته و هم دیدند بدستور  
 منقول توغما پستند خان از اسپ فرو و آمدند توغرا آوردند  
 خان استاده کرده





comes to know of the divine mystery. How can an idiot or a fool possibly appreciate all this?<sup>19</sup>

As heirs to this tradition, the Singh-Khalsa were enjoined by their *rahit maryada* to worship weapons, in particular the two forms of the Indian sword, the double-edged *khanda* representative of the Khalsa's father, Maha-Kal, and the single-edge *tulwar* representative of the Khalsa's mother, Chandi.<sup>20</sup> "A Guru's Sikh should respect and worship the sword; the Guru himself worshipped it."<sup>21</sup> Indeed, when complemented by a thorough study of *shastar vidya* the Singh-Khalsa regarded arms as their Shastar-Guru, "Guru in the weapons of war"; they were representative of the Guru's life force (*jan*) without which the Singh-Khalsa could never succeed in upholding *dharam*.



At Takht Hazoor Sahib, the centrepiece of the war implements laid out on the raised platform was the mesmerising "eight-armed" steel head of the Guru's battle standard<sup>†</sup> known as the *asht-bhuja dhuja*. This name is not merely descriptive of its arresting totemic symbology; "asht-bhuja" is also one of many names ascribed to its original owner: the eight-armed goddess of war, Chandi.<sup>‡</sup>

The story of the standard's origins, and how it came to rest at Hazoor Sahib, is preserved in local oral tradition. It is said that the tenth Guru received a sword and the standard as a gift from Chandi, the ultimate guardian of *dharam* in the Hindu world.<sup>22</sup> In a protracted ceremony undertaken to ensure victory in the battlefield, he had successfully propitiated her munificent power on behalf of the Sikhs.<sup>23</sup> That event, initiated in 1698, was a precursor to the historic founding of the Singh-Khalsa Panth the following year.

The standard remained with the Guru for several years, most probably in the hands of his personal attendant and the Khalsa's veteran standard-bearer, Akali Man Singh Nihang (d. 1708).<sup>§</sup> In the winter of 1705, the Guru came under siege of the combined forces of the Mughal governor of Sirhind and the Hill Rajas. Forced to abandon his fortified home in the Shivalik foothills and hugely outnumbered, he escaped with a small party of warriors. They were pursued to a minor fort in the village of Chamkaur where they were besieged

<sup>†</sup> The haft of the standard no longer exists.

<sup>‡</sup> Some of her other names include Durga, Bhagwati, Bhawani and Devi.

<sup>§</sup> He was also the founder of the Bhangar regiment of Akali Nihangs and the head of Baba Fateh Singh's regiment.

once more. When only a handful of his companions remained after a desperate day's fighting, the Guru engineered his escape with the aid of a devout double, Bhai Sant Singh.<sup>†</sup> In order to fool his Mughal pursuers who were then close to breaking in, the Guru invested Sant Singh with his garments, turban ornaments, plume and other personal artefacts including the asht-bhuja dhuja, the Guru's most recognisable insignia. The ruse worked, allowing the Guru to escape and gather more recruits before heading south to pursue a diplomatic solution with Emperor Aurangzeb.

The standard was destined to return to the Guru. While the Guru's party was travelling in Rajasthan, the standard made its way back into the hands of Akali Man Singh Nihang. The most likely route was through the Guru's adopted son, Zorawar Singh (d. 1708). He was one of the three Singhs who had remained behind in the fort of Chamkaur. After the Guru had made his escape, but before the fort was taken, young Zorawar Singh slipped through the cordon of fatigued Pathans. It was fortunate for him that his dark blue apparel was similar to that worn by the troops of the Mughal army; he was also aided by his youthful appearance—his beard not being fully grown allowed him to pass for a Pathan with a trimmed beard.<sup>24</sup>

After Baba Man Singh's death in a minor skirmish near Chittor in 1708, the asht-bhuja dhuja passed to the care of a protégé, Akali Gajgah Singh Nihang. After hearing that the Guru had died, Gajgah Singh made his way to Hazoor Sahib in the company of Akali Gurbaksh Singh Nihang and a small party of warriors. They helped in the construction of the takht with finances received from Mela Singh. Soon after Mela Singh's departure, Gajgah Singh was killed in a dispute with Akali Akalkala Singh Nihang who had only recently arrived at Nanded. Gurbaksh Singh deposited the Guru's standard at the Guru's shrine before retiring with a few colleagues to the nearby sanctuary of Nagina Ghat.<sup>25</sup>

From that moment, the asht-bhuja dhuja became the most revered of the weapons at Hazoor Sahib. It warranted a prominent position above all other weapons in the inner sanctum:<sup>‡</sup>

Abchal Nagar is famed in the entire world. It has been revealed for all to see. Know that the fierce jot resides there... It is there that the fierce form

<sup>†</sup> Some writers say it was Bhai Sangat Singh.

<sup>‡</sup> The worship of weapons conducted by Guru Gobind Singh included the reading of the ballads of Chandi and the decapitation a goat as a sacrifice to the divine Mother. The first weapon anointed with the goat's blood was Chandi's standard. This tradition continues to this day (see Volume II).



of the goddess Kalika<sup>†</sup> shines in all four directions... The sins of those blessed with a sight [of Abchal Nagar] flee.<sup>26</sup>



In those early years, transformations to the fabric of the Hazoor Sahib complex were paralleled by a change of shrine custodian. Akali Santokh Singh Nihang, the first jathedar of Hazoor Sahib, passed away in 1714. After a short period of deliberation by the other Sikhs residing there, they unanimously chose his close companion, Akali Khushal Singh Nihang, as the second jathedar. His six-year tenure apparently passed without much incident and another Akali Nihang warrior, Lal Singh, succeeded him in 1720.

With the assistance of Charat Singh of Kartarpur, a leading Sikh who came to the Deccan with a jatha of pilgrims from Punjab, Lal Singh oversaw further building developments. Charat Singh had stone bricks prepared and a solid stone foundation laid for the outer and inner takht shrine (known as Akal Bunga), but its roof remained rudimentarily constructed.<sup>‡</sup>

Although the Hazoori Sikhs<sup>§</sup> were making steady progress, political developments hundreds of miles to the north drew a temporary halt to their work.

<sup>†</sup> Kalika is the fiercest form of Chandi. In the writings of Guru Gobind Singh, the enemy-subduing power of the weapons is personified as the husband, Maha-Kal, and his spouse, Kalika.

<sup>‡</sup> A century later, Gahu Singh Pujari spent a princely sum on making the roof of the Akal Bunga solid. He also renovated the wells near the takht.

<sup>§</sup> The Sikhs who live at Hazoor Sahib are commonly known as Hazoori Sikhs.

### 3. SURVIVAL OF THE FITTEST





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In spite of the Khalsa's initially successful revolution to overthrow the Mughal government in Punjab, their mission faced a major setback following a split in their ranks.

Ideological differences had arisen between the Akali-Nihangs and their field commander, Banda Bahadur, who began to revert to his Vaishnava ways. The split weakened the Khalsa Panth considerably, leading to Banda's eventual capture and execution in 1716.

For several years, the state hunted down the remnants of the distinctly attired Singh-Khalsa, who had adopted guerrilla tactics to survive. Operating on the highways, the Akali-Nihangs led the Singh-Khalsa in looting merchants and convoys carrying the state's tax payments to Delhi. Their most favoured prizes were strong horses and arms, as these helped them to strike the government at its weakest points. They honed their fighting tactics and compensated for their low numbers by relying on speed and secrecy, long marches and strikes under cover of night, or at dawn or dusk. The authorities designated them highwaymen (*dharwees*) and dealt with them accordingly.

In 1726, the newly appointed governor of Punjab, Zakariya Khan (d. 1745), initiated a campaign to systematically curb the Khalsa's growth in a bid to restore law and order. Mobile columns of cavalry scoured the plains of Punjab in search of long-haired Sikhs. Within months, they had managed to clear the highways of the Sikh menace. In the hunt for the Sikhs, the Mughal administration offered generous rewards and incentives to bounty hunters, informants and the Muslim clergy in search of converts. The Punjab government paid five rupees<sup>†</sup> for information concerning the whereabouts of a Sikh, ten rupees for assisting the police in the arrest of a Sikh and twenty rupees for killing a Sikh. Also offered were land grants and other rewards for assisting in destroying groups of Sikhs in other ways.<sup>1</sup>



In this period of intense instability, many Singh-Khalsa sought refuge in the haunts of Punjab's dense jungles, swamplands and mountain passes; others hid in the sandy tracts of the Malwa desert bordering southern Punjab. For supplies of food and much needed intelligence the conspicuous Singh-Khalsa were careful to maintain links with their Sahajdhari-Khalsa allies: these Udasi, Nirmala

An Akali Nihang gazes across the plains of Punjab towards its prize-capital, the magnificent city of Lahore, c. 1770. The cartographer has referred to the holy city of Amritsar, situated to the east of Lahore, by its ancient name, Chak Guru ("Tchakgourou").

<sup>†</sup> The equivalent of approximately forty-five kilograms of rice.











PREVIOUS: This illustrated folio from *Tawarikh-i Jahandar Shah* (an incomplete account of the reigns of Bahadur Shah and his successor Jahandar Shah, c. 1770–1800), shows the climax of the Battle of Sirhind fought in 1710. Banda Bahadur's primary target was the city's governor, Wazir Khan. The climactic end of the battle has been captured in this painting, with a Nihang Singh having decapitated the nawab from behind.

OPPOSITE: Bhai Lakhmir Udasi, c. 1755.

and Sewapanthi<sup>†</sup> holy men travelled about relatively unmolested, mingling inconspicuously with Hindu sadhus or Muslim fakirs, attired as they were in a similar manner.<sup>2</sup>

In their dwellings, they sung the Guru's shabads and uttered prayers for the success of the Singh-Khalsa. As these holy men travelled among the people, they recounted stories of the privations endured by the Singhs and the horrific torture they had suffered in pursuit of their noble mission to free Punjab from Mughal tyranny.

In times of battle, they escaped persecution and were therefore relatively free to continue the practice of public worship and the serving of food in the langars of Sikh shrines reluctantly abandoned by the Singh-Khalsa.<sup>‡</sup> They also risked their lives to gather vital intelligence about planned military operations against the Singh-Khalsa. As experts in the science of healing, they administered medical aid to injured Singhs; away from the battlefield, they prepared and distributed many manuscript copies of the Sikh scriptures.<sup>3</sup>

So influential were the Udasis, Nirmalas and Sewapanthis among the common man, and so stirring their narratives, that several leading Sikh warriors emerged from among the new recruits to take up the gauntlet for the generations to come.<sup>4</sup>



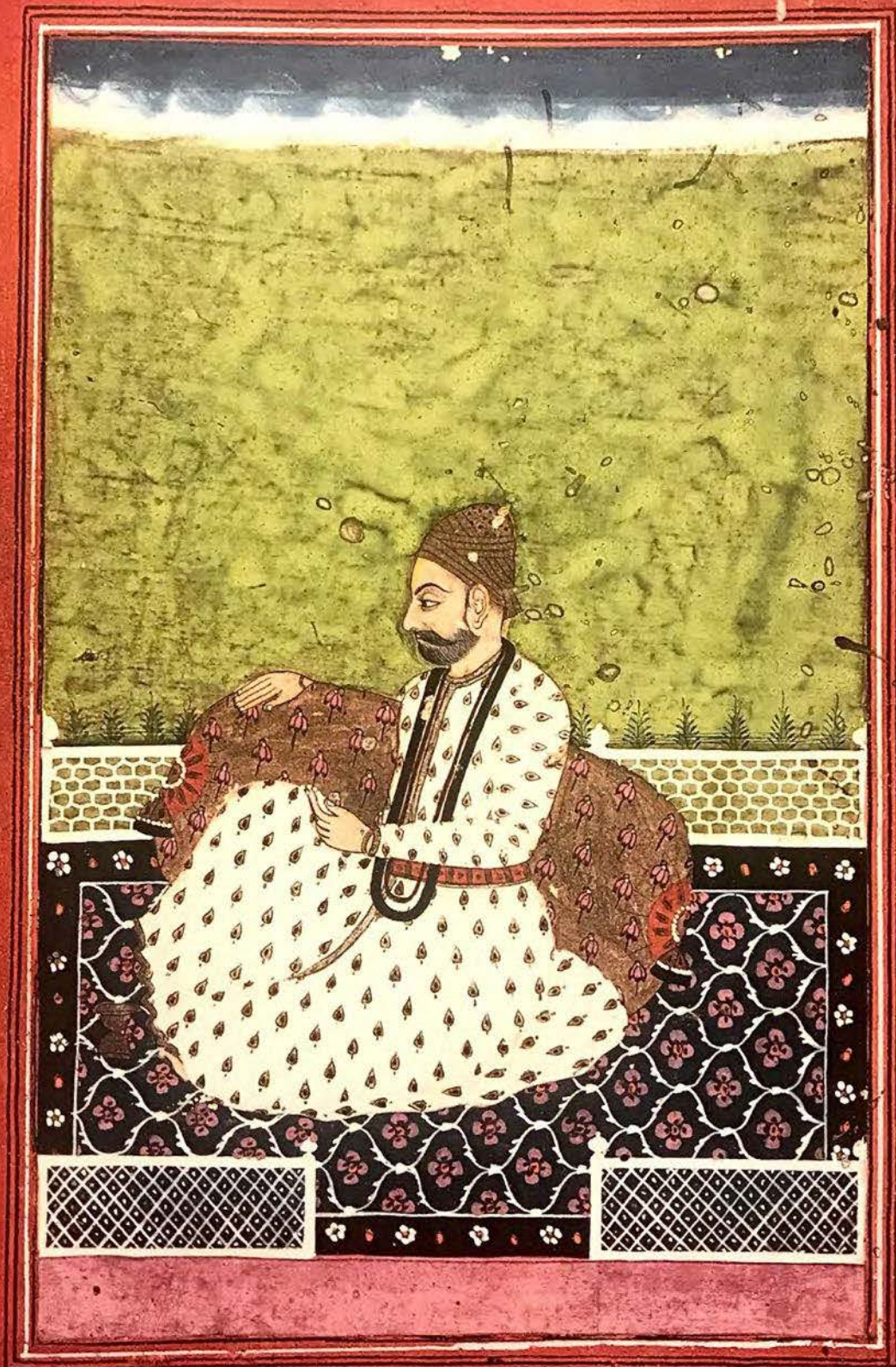
The Udasis and their devotees in the Deccan would become a major influence in the early development of Hazoor Sahib. One ardent admirer was a Mughal governor who established his independence at Hyderabad, a state that was to grow in splendour as the Mughal Empire began to wane.

Aurangzeb's attempt to revive the glory of the Mughal Empire had foundered through over-expansion in the south. His successors gradually lost authority over much of the Empire after his death in 1707, and as a result, centralised military and political authority weakened greatly in India. In the North, Mughal viceroys

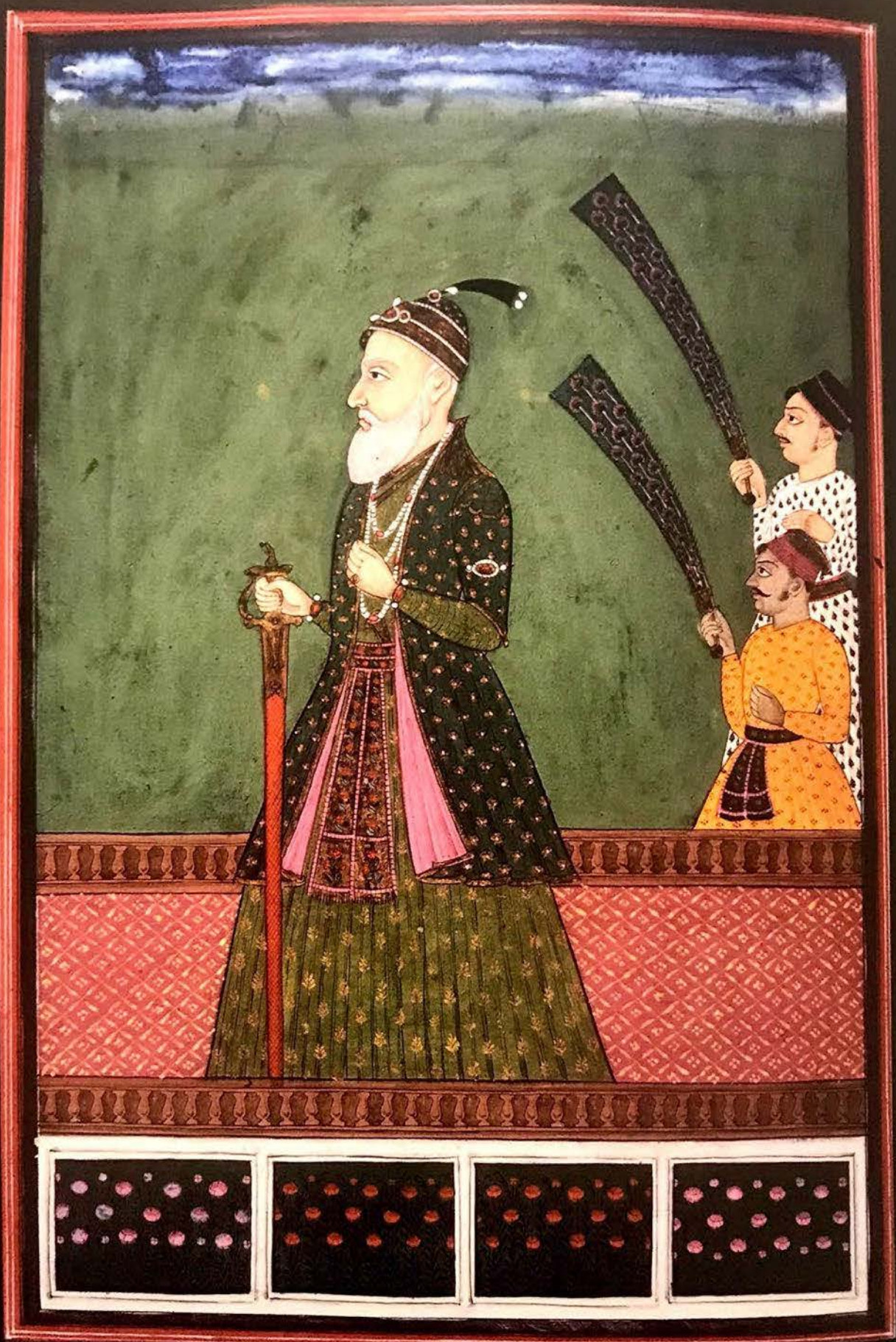
<sup>†</sup> Sewapanthis are also referred to as Adanshahis after Bhai Adan Shah (1688–1757), a follower of Bhai Khaneya (1648–1718), the founder of the order. These saints were primarily settled in Sunni Muslim regions. They sought to win over the Muslim populace with their selfless philanthropy. They soon earned the respect of the people and were highly regarded as being akin to Sufi darveshes. In their deras they did not confine their reading to the Sikh scriptures alone; they also read and expounded upon the famous Sufi commentary on the Koran, Maulana Jalla-ud-din Rumi's *Musnuvi*, and the stories of Sufi Pirs from the *Parashagh*, a theological text.

<sup>‡</sup> The most prominent example being the Harimandir Sahib in Amritsar.











of Avadh and Bengal surreptitiously diverted the centre's revenue to their own purposes and set themselves up as virtually independent monarchs.

Similarly, in the South, a high-ranking Mughal governor, Mir Qamar-ud-din Chin Qilij Khan (1671–1748), achieved independence and founded the kingdom of Hyderabad in the Deccan in the 1720s. Qamar-ud-din had been appointed *subedar* (governor) of the six provinces in the Deccan in 1713 by the Mughal Emperor, Farrukhsiyar (1683–1719).<sup>†</sup> He proved an able administrator and earned the title of Nizam-ul-Mulk or the Governor of the Kingdom. He battled against court intrigues at Delhi and defeated two armies sent against him in the name of the Mughal emperor. After a short spell as the empire's *wazir* (prime minister), he returned to his adopted home in the Deccan. In 1724, he defeated the Mughal governor, Mubariz Khan, to retake control of the region. Pledging his allegiance to the imperial Mughal government, he accepted the title 'Asaf Jah' granted by the emperor. He ruled the Deccan—comprising the provinces<sup>‡</sup> of Aurangabad, Bidar, Bijapur, Berar, Adilabad and Hyderabad—as virtual sovereign, and became known as the first nizam of the Asaf Jahi Dynasty.

Although Asaf Jah I chose Aurangabad<sup>§</sup> as the capital of his new state, his successors would shift their residence to Hyderabad, a city further east which was more centrally located and therefore further away from the troublesome Maratha horsemen. It was at Hyderabad that Asaf Jah I met an enchanting Udasi saint who blessed his kingdom with prosperity.

Mahant Sujjan Das 'Kamla Pathi', popularly known as Khaki Baba, hailed from Fatehkot in Punjab. This Udasi sadhu established a muth adjacent to Hussaini Alam arch in Hyderabad around the time of Asaf Jah's victory against Mubariz Khan. They met several times, and with each meeting, Asaf Jah I was increasingly touched by his spiritual discourses and thoroughly impressed with his miracle making. When Khaki Baba passed away, Asaf Jah I was by his side. The nizam ordered his staff to supervise the construction of a *samadhi* (funerary monument) which was built with great care, as was the large building raised around it. To maintain its upkeep, the nizam assigned an annual cash grant of 291 rupees<sup>¶</sup> in addition to a significant donation of land at Kukatpully. His dis-

The first nizam of Hyderabad, Mir Qamar-ud-din Nizam-ul-Mulk Asaf Jah I, with attendants, c. 1745.

† Qamar-ud-din carried some impressive credentials. He was the grandson of Chin Qilij Khan, Aurangzeb's brave commander who lost his life during the siege of Golconda in 1687.

‡ Each of these provinces or *subas* were divided into divisions or *sirkars* which were further divided into many districts called *taluks*.

§ A city founded by Aurangzeb.

¶ Until recently these donations and grants were still being continued by the private estate of the nizam to the muth which was named after a later mahant, Baba Puran Das.



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This manuscript titled *Pothi Sarb Guni* (The Book of All Virtues) is a late eighteenth-century anthology of compositions taken mainly from the *Adi Guru Granth Sahib* but written in the Persian Nasta'liq script. The opening pages shown here are from *Guru Nanak's "Japji Sahib"*. Other compositions include "*Sohila*", "*Oankar*", "*Sidh Gost*", "*Anand Sahib*", "*Sukhmani Sahib*", a selection of shabads by *Guru Tegh Bahadur*, and other miscellaneous texts including "*Sarb Guni*" after which the book is named.

The original owner is not known but it was acquired by Richard Johnson, the resident at Hyderabad between 1784 and 1788. An avid collector of objects oriental, Johnson served as Warren Hastings' assistant in Calcutta before being posted to Lucknow, then Hyderabad.

ciple, Mahant Dharam Das, a *brahmacharya* yogi<sup>†</sup> and a noted scholar of Hindu philosophy, succeeded Khaki Baba. He used to discuss spiritual matters with a local Muslim saint Shah Raza Moula Sahib who shared his passion for preaching unity among all peoples and engendering a sense of universal brotherhood.<sup>5</sup>



In tandem with the Singh-Khalsa, the Udasis shared control of Takht Hazoor Sahib for over a century. The Udasis of Abchal Nagar established their sway at the takht by the time of Mahant Ishar Das' death in 1725. His nominated disciple, Gopal Das, assumed the leadership of the local Udasis.<sup>6</sup>

Around 1727, Jathedar Lal Singh along with many of his Akali-Nihang companions left Hazoor Sahib and handed over a significant share of the responsibility for its upkeep to their Udasi brethren. Gopal Das continued the sacred ministration until 1746 when his disciple, Saran Das Udasi, succeeded him. This peaceful mendicant remained in his post for the next three decades.<sup>7</sup>

In 1728, an itinerant Akali Nihang, Bakhtawar Singh, took it upon himself to maintain an intermittent watch over the conduct of the Udasis. He continued in his self-imposed role as censor for the next five decades. In that time, the enterprising Charat Singh helped him to reorganize the takht's ecclesiastical structure by establishing permanent posts for its functionaries known as *pujaris*.<sup>†</sup> In recognition of his unstinting services, he was selected as jathedar of Hazoor Sahib in 1735.

The longest serving and arguably the most successful jathedar, Charat Singh's brilliance as a leader combined with a mastery of yoga and classical music endeared him to the local Hindu population.<sup>8</sup> For approximately the next fifty years, he gave direction and impetus to the working relationship between the Akali-Nihangs and the Udasi sadhus in the running of the takht. It was around this time that the Khalsa gave eminence to two further written works regarded as the compositions of Guru Gobind Singh; thus, alongside the *Adi Guru Granth Sahib* and the sacred weapons, the *Dasam Guru Granth Sahib* and *Sarbloh Guru Granth Sahib* were regarded as sacred scripture at Takht Hazoor Sahib.

As jathedar, Charat Singh would often summon reinforcements from Punjab to help stave off occasional attacks by the local Muslims against the takht and the

† A system of ascetic practices in which the adherent lives a life of moral restraint dedicated to learning all aspects of dharam. Strict celibacy is a central tenet.

‡ A pujari oversees the ceremonies connected with puja or worship in a shrine.



ایکا و کار کے پراد

جی

ست نام کرنا پو کہ نہ ہونو راکال سورت اجونی سسینک کو پراد  
سلوک آو سچ جو کا دچ ہی ہی چ نامک ہو ہی ہی چ جی ہندو پلا  
پڑی اول سو پی سوچ ہو وی ہی سوچن لکھ دار چپی جی ہو وی ہی  
لای ران لیو تار ہو کیان ہو کہ نہ اوری جی نہان پوریا ہزار  
نہس سپانان لکھ ہونہ تان اک پکی مال شکون سپیارا ہو  
کیون کورون توئی پال حکم مضامین پلنا نامک لکیا مال دو حکین  
ہو وی آکا حکم نہ کیا جانی حکین ہو وی جو حکم ملی دویا ہی حکین اوق

پنج

پنج حکین لکھ دو کہ سو کہ پارسہ انان حکین بخشش اک حکین ہدا  
ہوا ہند حکین اندر سب کو ہر حکم لکوی نامک حکین جی ہو جی  
تان ہوین کی نہ کوئی سوم کاوین کوتان ہو وی کسی تان کاوین  
کودات جانی نہان کاوین کوکین دویا چار کاوین کو دویا  
ویچار کاوین کو ساج کری نہ کہہ کاوین کو جیوی ہر دی کاوین  
جانی دسی دور کاوین کو دیکھی حاضر حضور کہنا کہی نہ اوی کوٹ  
کہہ کہہ کہی کوٹ کوٹ کوٹ دیند اریہ لینی تہک پانہ چکا  
جکتر کہا میں کہانہ حکین حکم چاوی راہ نامک و کسی دویا  
پیارم سچا صاحب سچ نامو ہیا کیا بہا و اپار کہان نشان دہیہ  
دات کری داتار ہری کی اکی مرکی جت دی دربار ہو ہون کوکین  
بولی جت سن دہری پارہ انرت ویلا سچ نامو دویا ویچار کرین

Mai Bhago (top right) wields a sword and shield at the battle of Khidrana in December 1705. Her husband and two brothers, Dilbagh Singh and Bhag Singh, died in the clash. This famous battle is the subject of this nineteenth-century Punjabi folk painting. In the late eighteenth century, a gurdwara (shown far left) was raised next to the pond to mark the battle site. The place became known as Muktsar ("pool of liberation").

Sikhs. This continuing traffic of armed jathas to and from Punjab would eventually give Punjabi Sikhs a central role in the affairs of Takht Hazoor Sahib.

Charat Singh owed a great deal of his success to the learned Mohar Singh who joined him soon after he became jathedar. Mohar Singh was highly cultivated, being fluent in Arabic and Persian and well versed in philosophy and politics.<sup>9</sup> The pair established a good rapport with Nanded's Muslim *naib* (deputy collector),<sup>†</sup> who helped smooth relations between the Sikhs and local Muslims, resolving several land disputes that had arisen. As a result, the trickle of pilgrims became a steady stream, and the offerings deposited for the upkeep of dugh and maintenance of the takht building gradually grew. In 1773, ten thousand rupees were applied for its renovation and structural expansion. A celebratory feast organised on a grand scale for the poor helped spread the fame of the premier Sikh shrine throughout the region.

Charat Singh bolstered his reputation further when he skilfully brought about a settlement between two brother-princes of Khandahar, a fortress town twenty miles southeast of Nanded. They gratefully acknowledged his contribution with an offering of 17,000 rupees to the Guru's treasury.

As funds poured in, several satellite structures were raised afresh. The first was a bunga on the banks of the Godavari at a place known as Nagina Ghat. In 1788, Mohar Singh (who by then had held the position of jathedar of the takht for three years) spent 85,000 rupees in addition to the offering made by the princes of Khandahar in constructing a modest bunga just a stone's throw from the takht in memory of one of the most remarkable women in Sikh history, Mai Bhago.<sup>10</sup>



Mai Bhago gained fame for wielding sword and shield at the battle of Khidrana in December 1705. She was ashamed when she came to hear about a band of Singhs from her neighbourhood who had returned home having abandoned the Guru at Anandpur Sahib in his time of need. They were unable to bear the adverse conditions of the siege laid by the imperial forces of Sirhind. In their desperation to leave the fort, they hastily drafted a statement in which they disowned the Guru. Shamed by their betrayal, Mai Bhago marshalled a jatha of

<sup>†</sup> The *naib* was the salaried employee of the absentee *talukdar*, a civil officer in charge of the *taluk* or district. His title encompassed many roles including the collector of revenue, the arbiter of landed tenures, the controller of the police, the magistrate, the civil judge and manager-general of his district. He was under the direct control of the diwan.

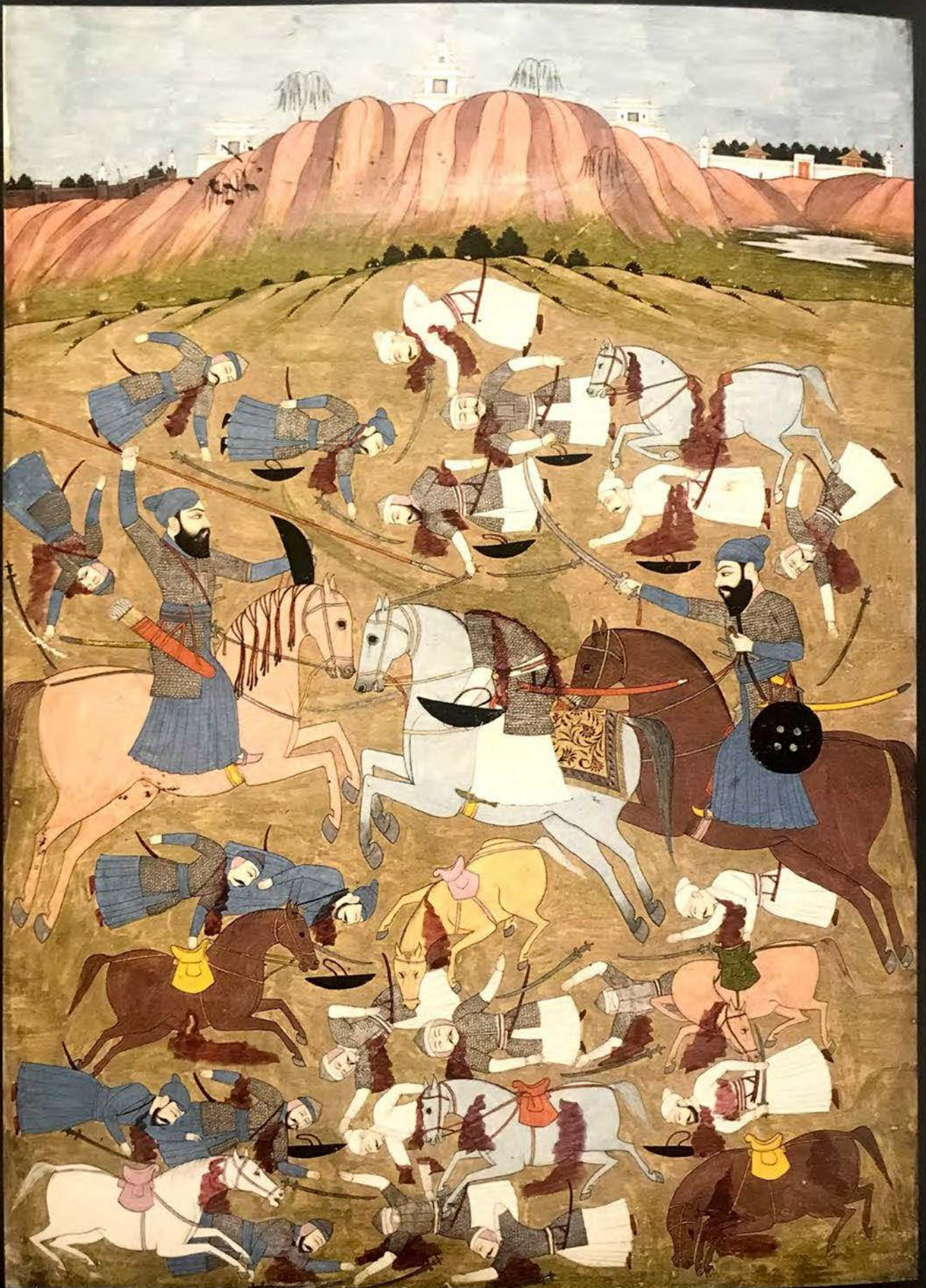




forty of the deserters and led them into battle in a bid to regain their honour. Their opportunity came near the pool of Khidrana, the only ample supply of water in the notoriously arid region of southern Punjab. It was there that they ran into an imperial Mughal host tasked with hunting down the Guru. They caught the rear of this tired and thirsty force in an ambush. During the ferocious engagement, the Guru arrived at a nearby hillock from where he supported their attack with a shower of arrows. The Mughals retreated under the onslaught, leaving the field littered with the dead, Mughals mingled with the Singh deserters. The Guru wished to cremate the bodies of the dead Sikhs. As the scene was surveyed, a survivor, Mahan Singh, the jathedar of the deserters, was discovered. As he lay mortally wounded, he begged the Guru's forgiveness. The last thing Mahan Singh glimpsed was the Guru tearing up the written statement.

The Guru also acknowledged Mai Bhago's leading role in the battle. Having recovered from her wounds, she joined his entourage. Remaining by his side clad in the garb of a Nihang, she made the journey south to the Deccan. She







passed her time absorbed in meditation on Akal Purakh; so profound was her experience that she forsook all sense of shame and proceeded to live as a naked sadhni in a state of ecstasy. It was only when the Guru ordered her to do so that she took to wearing a small turban and breeches (*kachh*), and wrapped her body in a blanket.<sup>11</sup> Arming herself with a large lance, Mai Bhago served in the Guru's bodyguard. She remained permanently in his camp, and guarded his bed with ten other Sikhs. She was widely respected as a living goddess, and the Guru was highly pleased with her piety and dedicated service. After the Guru's cremation, she resettled at Janwara (also known as Hasanabad) in Bidar. The Hazoori Sikh brought some of her ashes from her samadhi to Hazoor Sahib where they were kept in an eponymous bunga near the takht. Also preserved there were her personal belongings, including her javelin and a small metal water pitcher.<sup>12</sup>

The military governor of Jalandhar, Shams Khan, is killed by Nar Singh and Pahar Singh in the battle of Rahon fought in 1710, shortly after the fall of Sirhind.



Around this time in Punjab, the Buddha Dal was making a similar but larger scale effort to channel its resources into the building of gurdwaras across the hundreds of Sikh principalities, both petty and significant, that had emerged in the wake of Afghan domination in the north.

Beginning in 1708, when Guru Gobind Singh sent the first mission from Hazoor Sahib against the nawab of Sirhind, it had taken the Buddha Dal almost eight decades to get to the point when they had secured Punjab's porous borders and amassed the funds needed to carry out their designs.

In that period, the fortunes of the Singh-Khalsa had swung from one extreme to another: from being hunted to the very brink of extinction, all the way to the sight of hordes of triumphant Khalsa horsemen riding unimpeded on their mounts, each one laying claim to kingship as his birthright. Those were the days when the saying "a king in every saddle" became the reality for the Singh-Khalsa.

At the commencement of their epic struggle, the Singh-Khalsa incited peasant uprisings against local officials and Muslim landlords, and held Punjab intermittently from 1710 to 1715. But the Akali-Nihangs led by Binod Singh found themselves having to fight on two fronts: the external threat from the Mughal Empire and internal dissensions caused by a power-mad Banda Bahadur who had contravened Guru Gobind Singh's injunctions by declaring his intention to become the eleventh Guru of the Singhs. Equally obnoxious to them were his vain attempts at weakening the traditions of the Akali-Nihangs by introducing innovations to their diet and dress: he sought to ban the consumption of meat,

alcohol and onions,<sup>13</sup> and campaigned to replace the sacred blue of the Akali-Nihangs with the red Vaishnava garb.<sup>14</sup> Banda also introduced other Vaishnava practices such as washing firewood to preserve insect life. Binod Singh supported by other Akali-Nihangs including Deep Singh Shaheed and Gurbaksh Singh Shaheed eventually broke away from an arrogant Banda, who, isolated with his followers in a fort, eventually surrendered to the Mughals in 1715. His execution in the streets of Delhi was a gruesome affair, and was purposefully delayed until 700 of his loyal companions had been beheaded in a gory weeklong spectacle, much to the delight of the baying crowds.<sup>15</sup>

Soon afterwards, the scattered bands of the Singh-Khalsa were forced to flee to inaccessible areas of the hills, leaving their land and womenfolk in the care of relatives. The Singh-Khalsa lived like outlaws, existed by plunder, and came close to annihilation on several occasions. Binod Singh died in a skirmish with the Mughal forces in 1721. Akali Darbara Singh Nihang (1645–1735), a veteran warrior who had learnt shastar vidya from Guru Tegh Bahadur, succeeded him as the Buddha Dal's second jathedar. Under his direction, the Buddha Dal took advantage of the political intrigues that plagued the ruling elite in Delhi in the early decades of the eighteenth century, and the seismic shocks to the old structure in the late 1730s when the revenues of the rich provinces to the south of the capital were rapidly drained away into Maratha pockets. Darbara Singh instilled a sense of strategic cohesion into the disparate guerrilla bands and orchestrated operations to weaken the Punjab government militarily and fiscally.

His most talented protégé during this period was Kapur Singh (1697–1753), a lowly trooper who rose through the ranks to become the Khalsa's finest military tactician. This organisational genius single-handedly altered the Khalsa's fortunes by reorganising the plundering bands called *misls* into highly effective cavalry units associated with specific geographic areas. His success was in part due to the political upheavals that ate away at the cohesion of the Mughal government.

The weakness of the empire was cruelly displayed in 1739 when it was defeated by a Persian invasion under Nadir Shah (1688–1747). While Mughals and Persians slaughtered one another, the Khalsa plundered the booty-laden units of the Persian army and the wealthy who had fled from the towns. Much of their loot they distributed among the poor, which in turn secured their support in leaner times. The decay in the Mughal government was contemptuously confirmed by the Afghans under Ahmed Shah Abdali (1722–1772) whose nine invasions in the period 1745–1767 created a power vacuum in the great plains, marked by their total defeat of the Marathas at Panipat in 1761. Kapur Singh



masterminded the effective military strategies that allowed the Akali-Nihang Singhs to mount an exhausting guerrilla war against the Afghans that eventually forced Ahmed Shah to withdraw his force from Punjab.

Kapur Singh groomed Jassa Singh Ahluwalia (1718–1783) for greatness in preparation for taking over the reins of power, which he did in 1753. Jassa Singh led the Khalsa towards realising the Guru's dream of establishing kingdoms across a vast expanse of territory. The first significant milestone was the destruction of the accursed city of Sirhind in 1757 where the Guru's youngest sons had been executed. Four years later, they had occupied Lahore, Punjab's foremost city.

To bolster their revenues and to secure their freshly conquered dominions against external threat, they systematically extracted protection money from recalcitrant neighbours, a practice that came to be known euphemistically as *kambli*, or blanket money, after the blanket spread on the floor to gather the collections.

The allure of adventure and the prospect of territorial expansion cast the Khalsa's unbounded ambitions further afield than Punjab:

High on *bhang*,<sup>†</sup> they spoke of conquering the world. When the Singhs secured their own country, they became fearless... They began to live off the income from the tribute they acquired from preying on the lands around... They made no [administrative] arrangements for anything, and remained intoxicated, consuming copious amounts of *bhang*... they spoke of conquering all of Hindustan. 'Let's go to Delhi and take its throne. Then we will extend our dominions over the Marathas. We will then proceed to the gurdwara at Abchal Nagar and make great cauldrons of *karah prashad*. Next, we will conquer Dacca and Bengal. After gaining access to the ocean, we will meet with all of the other countries.' Thus, drinking *bhang*, the Bhujangi Nihang Singhs gathered and made a great commotion. Not taking care of their own country, they remained intoxicated, drinking *bhang* day and night.<sup>16</sup>

In January 1762, the Khalsa suffered a colossal loss at the hands of Abdali's army: over 20,000 men, women and children fell massacred in a single day's fighting. Within the year, the Khalsa were ready to avenge that holocaust and

† Literally "cannabis", *bhang* is also synonymous with *sukha* since this drink is often laced with a touch of *bhang*.





PREVIOUS: A map of the Suba of Lahore, c. 1770. In official parlance, the Mughal province of Lahore was equivalent to the region of Punjab. In addition to the various character studies and sketches of ceremonies thought to be representative of Punjab, the artist has included the region's two great military antagonists in the eighteenth century at the bottom of the map: an Akali Nihang horseman ("Singh cavalier") and an Afghan horseman ("Abdalla cavalier").

confront the Afghan menace in a final apocalyptic showdown. A descendant<sup>†</sup> of some of the principal warriors of the eighteenth century vividly described the Khalsa's psychological preparation in anticipation for the looming carnage. The Singhs gathered at Amritsar and began by lighting a *havan*; as the sacrificial fire consumed everything offered to its flames, the blood-stirring ballads of Chandi were chanted. In a climactic blood-drenched frenzy, two Singhs decapitated an oblatory ox with the simultaneous blows of their khandas. The carcass was thrown into the raging fire as an offering to the goddess.<sup>17</sup> Making a pledge to do or die, and fortified with the knowledge that their guardian Chandi was with them, the Khalsa commenced their slaughter of the Afghan hordes. So overwhelming were their attacks that Ahmed Shah was forced to retreat to Lahore, then chased unrelentlessly all the way up to Attock.<sup>18</sup> The Afghan king returned in subsequent years but the Khalsa proceeded to humiliate him in the battlefield with their devastating attacks. He was literally chased out of Punjab, never to regain his foothold on the land of the five rivers.

Within a decade of defeating the Afghans, the Buddha Dal had smashed through the gates of Delhi and seated Jassa Singh on the Mughal emperor's throne in the Red Fort. But success came at a price; free from the Afghan menace and crowned masters of a newly defined Punjab that stretched from the suburbs of Delhi to the River Attock, the misl organisation fell apart as ugly factionalism overtook its chieftains. As Singh turned on Singh, their internecine quarrels fatally curtailed their planned conquest of "all of Hindustan", let alone of Abchal Nagar, leaving them boxed within the borders of Punjab.



In 1783, Naina Singh (1736–1836), a strict Akali Nihang disciplinarian, became the fifth jathedar of the Buddha Dal. During his tenure, a distinct division emerged in the ranks of the Singh-Khalsa between those who preferred the courtly life and royal pursuits, and those who favoured the more austere existence practised by Guru Gobind Singh's warriors in the period during, and

<sup>†</sup> In writing *Sri Gur Panth Prakash* which was completed in 1841, Ratan Singh Bhangu made extensive use of the oral tradition that had come down to him from his parents and grandparents. The famous Sikh martyr, Akali Mehtab Singh Nihang of Mirankotia, was his paternal grandfather, while Akali Shyam Singh Nihang of the Karorasinghia Misl was his maternal grandfather. His father, Rai Singh Nihang, fought in the ranks of the Buddha Dal during the Afghan invasions. The unnamed voices of several other veterans of the Sikh struggle with whom he had intimate relations also find a place in his chronicle.

immediately after, his lifetime.

As a leading advocate of the spartan tradition, Naina Singh removed himself from the petty intrigues of the Sikh courts, and instead concentrated the Buddha Dal's efforts on collecting tributes from the ruling Sikh classes as a means of initiating the building of new shrines to commemorate the lives of the Gurus. Considering the Buddha Dal to be their most ancient institution, the jathedars of the misls paid due reverence to the Guru's Beloved Armies. They deposited with its treasury a tenth (*daswandh*) of their annual incomes, derived largely from plunder and tribute.<sup>19</sup> The Buddha Dal jathedar, Jassa Singh Ahluwalia had established a precedent for utilising such war booty on the construction of sacred buildings. The levelling of the Harimandir Sahib and Akal Takht by the Afghans in the 1760s initiated a reconstruction project that received its funding from the Buddha Dal's bi-annual raids into the rich gangetic plains and the suburbs of Delhi.



Some of that plunder and booty also made its way south to Hazoor Sahib. At the head of a jatha, Akali Maha-Kal Singh Nihang, a renowned Buddha Dal warrior, reached Abchal Nagar where he deposited tributes and loot collected from the Rajputs of Rajasthan.<sup>20</sup> With this new infusion of cash flowing into Hazoor Sahib, the place became a hive of activity. The locals made substantial enhancements and embellishments to the existing shrines, and had new ones erected. Charat Singh built a bunga<sup>†</sup> for himself where he practised, and occasionally taught, yoga, and also undertook the renovation of a well adjacent to the takht, both at a cost of 20,000 rupees.<sup>21</sup>

This prosperity was short-lived as it irked the fanatical element within the local Muslim population. In 1791, the year Ram Singh succeeded Mohar Singh as takht jathedar, frequent skirmishes broke out between the Muslims of Nanded and the Hazoori Sikhs. These clashes continued into the nineteenth century at a great cost to the Sikh colony; prominent Hazoori Sikhs killed in these encounters include Akali Maha-Kal Singh Nihang and Dharam Singh, a much-respected functionary, in 1803, and Jathedar Charat Singh<sup>‡</sup> in 1815.<sup>22</sup>

In these trying times, the Sikh colony at Hazoor Sahib was about to receive

† After his death, a copy of the Sarbloh Guru Granth Sahib was installed here, leading to it being called the Sarbloh Bunga. It later became known as the Baba Nidhan Singh Bunga.

‡ This is a different Charat Singh from his namesake who became jathedar in 1735.



the patronage of a middle-ranking, diminutive Sikh employed by the nizam as a bookkeeper. No one could have known it at the time, but this humble devotee of Guru Nanak named Chandu Lal was destined to become the most powerful man in the State of Hyderabad.

## 4. THE RISE OF THE BOOKKEEPER







## 4. THE RISE OF THE BOOKKEEPER

The patronage afforded to the Sikhs by Chandu Lal (1766–1845) from the commencement of the nineteenth century had the effect of binding their destiny with that of the royal house of the nizam of Hyderabad and the emergent power of the British Government in India.

Chandu Lal was the head of one of the most distinguished Hindu families in the Deccan. The ancestry of his branch of the Khatris<sup>1</sup> traced itself back to Lahore where the most illustrious of their ancestors, one of the celebrated *navratan*,<sup>†</sup> Raja Todar Mal (d. 1589), served as Emperor Akbar's finance minister in the sixteenth century.

In 1713, Rai Mool Chand, fifth in descent from Todar Mal, accompanied the Mughul viceroy, Mir Qamar-ud-din Chin Qilij Khan, who would later assume the title Asaf Jah I after founding the kingdom of Hyderabad in 1724, to the Deccan. Under the first nizam, Rai Mool Chand held the office of *karrora*, or the head of the customs and excise department. His son, Rai Lakhmi Ram, succeeded him in that office around 1770.<sup>‡</sup> Lakhmi Ram had five sons, two of whom, Rai Nanak Ram and Rai Narain Das, served diligently under him. On Lakhmi Ram's death, the elder of these two, Nanak Ram, succeeded to his father's appointment. When his younger brother died about the year 1776, Nanak Ram took his nephews, Chandu Lal (1766–1845) and Govind Baksh (d. 1835), under his wing.<sup>2</sup>

Chandu Lal was destined to become a pivotal figure in the administration and commerce of Hyderabad State. He initially held a subordinate appointment in the customs department from which he received a useful business education and an eye for opportunity. Through his uncle's influence, Chandu Lal's early career brought him into contact with Hyderabad's highest officials. In 1794, he was presented to the second nizam, Ali Khan, Asaf Jah II (1734–1803), and his *diwan* (minister), Azim-ul-Umara by the nizam's son-in-law. As a consequence of this meeting, Chandu Lal was ordered to take charge of the districts of Ouncha and Purgool. The following year he returned to duties at Hyderabad where he was patronised by Shamsheer-ul-Mulk, an elderly and much-liked adherent of the nizam.

Shortly after Nanak Ram's death in the closing years of the eighteenth century, Raja Chandu Lal was promoted to the position of *karrora* but he soon

A divided India, c. 1790. By the close of the eighteenth century, the territorial gains of the "Seiks" (coloured light green, top left) had extended as far north as the Attock and down south to the very suburbs of Delhi. The Mughal Emperor and his imperial capital, Delhi, were then effectively under the control of the "Mahratta States" (dark green, centre). The "British Possessions" (pink, right) dominated far away to the east. All three powers were to cross paths as they vied for Delhi, the potent symbol of paramountcy over all Hindustan. In the Deccan, the Nizam of Hyderabad's dominion (orange) is almost entirely surrounded by the Marathas.

<sup>†</sup> Literally "nine gems". The *navratan* were a group of nine extraordinary people and trusted advisors in Akbar's court. They included poets, a musician, a military commander, a finance minister and a mystic.

<sup>‡</sup> His name is also mentioned in the records as Rai Lutchee Ram.



resigned the office when more lucrative opportunities presented themselves as a result of British interests in the state of Hyderabad.<sup>3</sup>



Within the first decade of the nineteenth century, the British succeeded in establishing themselves as the paramount power in North India in place of the 'Great Mughul'.

Although the Mughal emperor, Shah Alam II (1728–1806), still occupied the throne of Delhi, he had long before been deprived of his independent power and had opted to live as a pensioner under British protection.

On the road to Delhi, the British had decisively crushed the authority of the great Maratha confederacy in 1803; the Peshwa's government<sup>†</sup> was overthrown and the two greatest Hindu warriors of the day, Daulat Rao Scindia (1779–1827) and Jeswant Rao Holkar (d. 1811), were reduced to submission. They also annexed the principality of Raghuji Bhosle, the Maratha chief of Berar.

In Hyderabad State, the British had engineered a similar set of circumstances in their favour. At the close of the eighteenth century, French officers disciplined the nizam's army, but the war with Tippu Sultan of Mysore cemented a close friendship between the British and the nizam.

The success of British arms over increasingly large areas of the subcontinent forced the state of Hyderabad to enter into a series of treaties beginning in 1798. Territorial boundaries were set and the forces of leading nobles disbanded; in addition, the nizam was induced to disband his French battalions and to organise a new force in its place. The expulsion of the French, followed by new treaty arrangements enshrined in the Subsidiary Alliance of 1800, rendered British influence paramount in the administrative affairs of Hyderabad.

The third nizam, Mir Akbar Ali Khan Sikandar Jah, Asaf Jah III (1768–1829), acceded to the throne in 1803 just as the last relics of Hyderabad's political independence were snatched away to leave in its place an impoverished British dependency.



Chandu Lal had been a careful witness to the course of these historic events. He

<sup>†</sup> The Peshwas were the Brahmin prime ministers of the Maratha kings who became hereditary rulers of the Maratha Empire in the eighteenth century.

became convinced that the nizam's power could not support itself and therefore devoted himself, "with unquestionable fidelity, to the alliance with the British Government."<sup>4</sup>

It was Chandu Lal's uncle, Nanak Ram, who first came to the notice of the British when he held charge of the territory that the nizam received as his share of the conquests from Tippu Sultan following the Battle of Seringapatam in 1799. Chandu Lal received the charge of Belhary, Gooty, Kurpah and a large portion of the districts that were afterwards ceded to the East India Company by the terms of the treaty signed in 1800.

On his return to Hyderabad, his services were much appreciated by the diwan, Nawab Aristu Jah, whose recommendation to the nizam resulted in Chandu Lal being bestowed with the title "Raja Bahadur" with a *mansab*<sup>†</sup> of 5,000 rupees.

Around this time, Chandu Lal also came to the notice of the British by delivering districts over to the Company's officers.<sup>5</sup> The British resident at Hyderabad, Colonel James Achilles Kirkpatrick (1764–1805), took particular notice of the Khatri official. From that point on, a relationship began to develop that would see Chandu Lal operate as an unofficial adviser and point of contact for a succession of British residents in the city.

Since 1779, the British Government in India had deputed residents to report on the financial and political condition of this increasingly destitute state with all its courtly intrigues. The key to the resident's control over the direction of the State's internal administration was a close alliance with the nizam's Muslim diwan. The diwan helped control provinces under provincial governors, and were often close to the local financial community and to the all-important revenue farmers. He also assumed the role of diplomatic intermediary between the nizam and the British; despite the agreement to abstain from interference in the State's internal affairs, embodied in the Treaty of Subsidiary Alliance, the resident sought access to the nizam and offered constant advice through the diwan.

It was implicitly understood from this point on that the British Government should approve of the appointment of the diwan, although no absolute agreement existed between the two governments to that effect. Thus, in 1804 the British succeeded in making Sikandar Jah's first diwan, Mir Alam, a tool of their interests. With the support of the resident, Raja Chandu Lal gained employment under Mir Alam in various offices of trust, the first being the charge

† A rank or office, the holder of which is called a *mansabdar*. The recipient receives a small state grant.



Nizam Sikandar Jah gives audience to four ministers, c. 1810. Nearest to the nizam is the diwan, Munir-ul-Mulk; standing to his right are Raja Chandu Lal and his brother Raja Govind Baksh.

of lands assigned for the payment of the nizam's household guards.<sup>†</sup> His next appointment came in 1806 when he was raised to the high office of *peshkar* or deputy prime minister. The *peshkar* was responsible for maintaining the state's accounts and controlling the treasury. This post, initiated by Asaf Jah II, was to become the preserve of Raja Chandu Lal's family for over a century. In the same year, Chandu Lal's brother, Raja Govind Baksh, received the appointment of governor of Berar.<sup>‡</sup>

The British were anxious for Diwan Mir Alam's successor to be attached to their cause as they were convinced that Sikandar Jah was at heart hostile to them and could not be trusted. Upon the diwan's death in 1808, they insisted that the pro-British Chandu Lal be appointed as his successor.<sup>§</sup> "Whoever should be minister," opined the resident, Captain Thomas Sydenham (1780–1816), to his superiors,

it would be for our interest that Chundoo Lal should possess the largest share of active influence in the administration... when his character and qualifications are brought into comparison with those of any other public officer at this court, I can conscientiously declare, that in my judgment there is no other arrangement which is likely to be more conducive to the prosperity and happiness of this country.<sup>§</sup>

The nizam refused the demand on account of his lack of social status, being as he was a Hindu *kayasth*<sup>†</sup> and thus, according to ideas prevailing at the Hyderabad court at the time, unsuitable for the duties of higher administration. A diwan, it was felt, ought to be a nobleman, and preferably a Muslim nobleman at that. The strength of social prejudice against Chandu Lal came out in a conversation between Sikandar Jah and the late Mir Alam's son-in-law who was the nizam's preferred candidate, Munir-ul-Mulk (1770–1832):

Will you persist in talking to me of Rajah Chundoo Loll? He is the son of a *Mootusude*<sup>‡</sup> and was himself bred one, and his Business, you know, is to receive and pay money, and keep the accounts of the Government. He has no relations, nor even any friends in my family. He is not even of the same religion. It is you that are the person of consequence... You are

<sup>†</sup> These were the Paigah troops under the command of Shams-ul-Umara, the head of the Paigah aristocratic family.

<sup>‡</sup> Hindu writer and administrative caste.

<sup>§</sup> An accounts clerk.



descended from a family celebrated for their piety, and your religion is the same as mine. What comparison therefore can there be between Rajah Chundoo Loll and you?<sup>9</sup>

After a lengthy period of intense discussion, the nizam and the Company finally reached an 'agreement' in 1809. The open hostility to the British alliance harboured by Munir-ul-Mulk meant that the British would only allow the nizam's favourite to retain the nominal functions of diwan. The real business of administration was to be conducted by the deputy minister, Raja Chandu Lal. Acting effectively as diwan with plenary powers, Chandu Lal was handed the reins of the entire administration.<sup>10</sup>

Chandu Lal's ascent was complicated by the nature of the Hyderabad administration and by the peculiar characters both of the nizam and of Munir-ul-Mulk. So long as Chandu Lal was supported by the British, he was excluded from the confidence of the nizam whose suspicious hostility was constantly fanned by



the jealous influence of the puppet diwan.<sup>11</sup> Yet Chandu Lal knew all too well that opposition to him was treated as hostility to the British Government and disaffection to the alliance of 1800. The nizam resented his helplessness as a nominal ruler, became melancholy and for the remainder of his reign, lost all interest in governing.<sup>12</sup>

For almost the next four decades, Chandu Lal would represent the heart of the 'resident's party' in court politics. Except as a last resort, he knew that the British Government, bound by treaty to refrain from interfering in internal matters, would not meddle in his administration, thereby granting him power as the sole dispenser of good, evil and the magnificent revenues of the sprawling principality.



Once in power, Chandu Lal quickly gained a reputation for his sagacious diplomacy, keen scholarship and a love for the arts as evidenced by his liberal patronage of musicians and poets.

He was free from ostentation in his personal and professional living, shunning the extravagance practiced by others. While holding the high office of peshkar, he was paid by a commission on the revenues that produced an average of nearly three lakhs of rupees annually. In addition, he also received a considerable sum in presents on the appointment of persons to different offices. Despite this princely income, he was always out of pocket. His remarkable benevolence towards the saintly was made legendary by his habit of making "gifts to all holy men, Mussulmen Faquirs, Hindoo Gooroos, and religions beggars of all description [who] were alike the objects of his bounty. Had a Franciscan or Dominican Friar appealed to his bounty, Christian as he was, he would have been sent away rejoicing..."<sup>13</sup> So widespread was his reputation for liberality, people from remote parts of India flocked to him for help; it is said that no appealant was ever disappointed.<sup>14</sup>

However, his shortcomings in the art of making strong executive decisions gave rise to concerns about his effectiveness in the role of diwan: "He is better qualified," thought the resident, "to be a Deputy, than a principle... A man that has no confidence in himself, can never Command it in other People. Everybody likes Chandoo Loll, but no body is afraid of him."<sup>15</sup> Both in policy-making and in its execution the British judged him to be weak and hesitant, always needing some strong prop on which to lean. He was, in many ways, the perfect man for the work they required of him.



A talented and shrewd statesman, Chandu Lal tried to make good his deficiencies in social status and strength of character by means of intrigue and jobbery. To appease the growing enmity of the Muslim courtiers, and to neutralize the odious opinion they held of him, Chandu Lal distributed money without limit; bribes were made to extravagant and profligate nobles and all their retainers, while large sums passed to the private hoards of the nizam himself; even his favourite mistress, Chandni Begam, became Chandu Lal's special patron. In a conversation with the resident, Munir-ul-Mulk, the nominal minister, confirmed that "the whole of the nizam's family was bribed, that every one of his own servants was in Chandu Lal's pay, and that even his own mother-in-law sent to the minister a daily report of the occurrences of the inmost recesses of his house."<sup>16</sup>

The nizam pays a visit to the British residency at Hyderabad on the bank of the River Musi, c. 1830.

This was not the only method adopted by Chandu Lal to marshal support. He gave clandestine allowances to the residency, earning it a reputation at Calcutta of being a "shameful monument of rapacity built and furnished by the poverty stricken state."<sup>17</sup> The supply of fruits and dinners to keep the residency officials in good humour was regularly maintained, prompting a later resident, Charles Metcalfe, to remark that they "came in such quantities as to give them the appearance of regular supplies, instead of being merely complimentary."<sup>18</sup> Such was the man Chandu Lal who, caring only for the maintenance of his power, and acquiescing to every demand made upon him by the resident, almost



This painting by a Tanjore artist shows a Sikh couple from south India, c. 1805. The district of Tanjore in Tamil Nadu was ruled by the Marathas until 1799 when it was ceded to the East India Company. This painting reflects the manner in which artists responded to the increasing interest shown by the British in the region's trades, occupations, customs, castes and religions.

brought Hyderabad to the verge of bankruptcy.<sup>19</sup>



Thrust into the epicentre of Hyderabad's political arena, Chandu Lal exercised unbounded power, a power that existed on the full support granted him by the British Government in India. The British were acutely aware how deeply Chandu Lal was beholden to them for his status and for his own security. In a letter dated 14 June 1817, the resident, Henry Russell, described how the minister was "indebted exclusively to our Government",

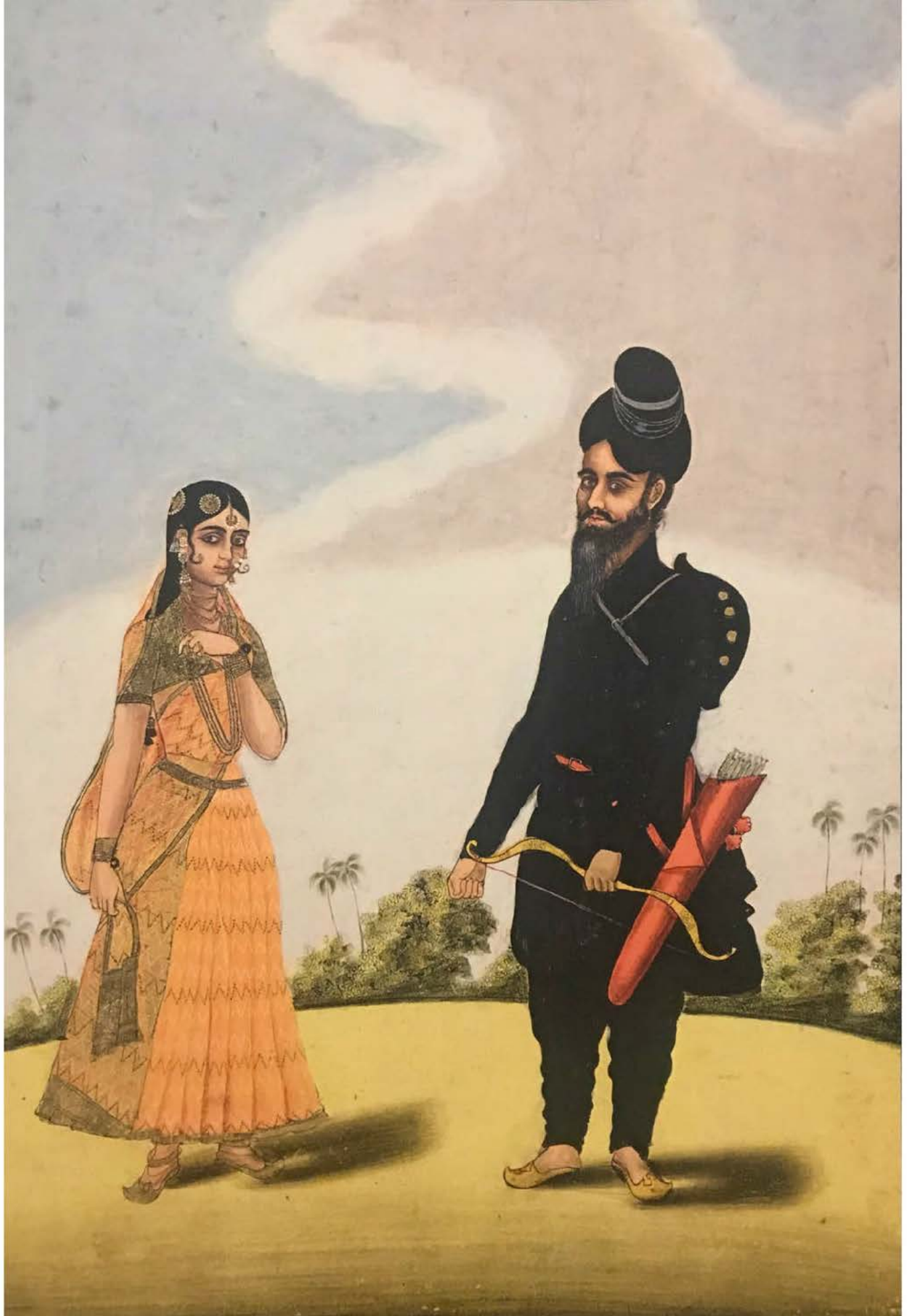
for both his elevation and his support, how the minister was and he is bound to us by the surest of all ties, that of knowing that the very tenure of his office depends upon our ascendancy. If we were to lose our control over the Government [of Hyderabad] he would certainly lose his authority, and probably his life.<sup>20</sup>

Well aware of his precarious position in a hostile court, Chandu Lal wasted no time or expense in hiring a large personal bodyguard recruited from the ample supply of military material in the nizam's dominions.

Like the Mughal army, Hyderabad's army was not centralised. It consisted of units of Arab, African, Pathan and Rohilla troops raised, paid, mustered, equipped and accounted for by leading nobles and commanders known as *jamadars*.<sup>†</sup> In most cases, the troops and their commanders of this irregular force known as *Nazm-i-Jama'iat* were from the same ethnic or religious stock. These were bands of ex-mercenaries that had formerly been employed by the Marathas, principally to garrison forts, which they defended with remarkable valour. In the early nineteenth century, they had taken up regular employment with the government, nobility, and richer merchants of Hyderabad. The Arabs in particular were troublesome at the best of times and constantly fighting amongst themselves. They caused a great deal of bloodshed in the streets of Hyderabad and terrorised the farmers in the countryside when their wages fell in arrears.<sup>21</sup>

Driven by the need for an effective counterpoise to the Arabs, and doubtful of the religious loyalties of Muslim troops in general, Chandu Lal placed his faith

<sup>†</sup> "Jamadar" is an Urdu word composed of *jam'aa* ("group" in Arabic) and *dar* ("holder" in Persian).







in the men drawn from the thriving colony of Sikhs at Hazoor Sahib.<sup>22</sup>

This decision gave rise to an entirely new Sikh irregular unit, the *Jama'iat-i-Sikhan*. In addition to their main function as bodyguards, they also collected revenue from recalcitrant landlords and suppressed the rebellions instigated by other marauders that often erupted in the most turbulent provinces of the kingdom.

The resident, Thomas Sydenham, noted the minister's religious affiliations with the Sikhs in a letter to the Imperial Government in 1810.<sup>23</sup> In particular, he thought it proper to mention that

Raja Chandulall is one of either *kuttaees* [*sic* Khattris?] who follow the tenets of Manik [*sic* Nanak] Shah and he has many Sikhs in his service, that he is the patron of the college of Sikhs, which is established at Nanded on the Godavari and that he is very bountiful to the Sikhs in general. Chandulall is the Mureed or disciple of a Pir named Shaebjee [*sic* Sahib ji], who is reputed to be a descendant of Manuck Shah and who is held in great veneration by the Sikhs and those who follow the tenets of Manik.<sup>24</sup>

The *pir* (holy man) referred to as "Sahib ji" was none other than the highly revered Udasi sadhu, Baba Priyatam Das (c. 1722–1831). In the 1770s, this Udasi saint founded a monastery at Amritsar. The Nirban Akhara, as it was initially known, later became popular as the Sangalwala Akhara because of a heavy iron chain (*sangal*) that hung at its gate in commemoration of his victory in spiritual discourse and miracle working over the Sannyasis of Haridwar.

The mercantile Khatri Sikh community and Udasi Sikh mendicants were both renowned as intrepid travellers. While the former spread into the sprawling metropolises in search of profitable markets, the latter followed in the footsteps of Guru Nanak, carrying the light of dharam into the furthest corners of India.

During a lengthy tour of the Deccan, Priyatam Das met Chandu Lal's uncle, Nanak Ram. This sahajdhari Sikh devotee donated generously to allow Baba Priyatam Das to establish Udasi langars at various places of pilgrimage. Nanak Ram's munificent gift of 700,000 rupees also enabled the Udasi Baba to establish a central Udasi seat called the *Panchaiti Barra Akhara*<sup>†</sup> at Prayag

This beautiful work of devotional art was probably commissioned by Chandu Lal's uncle, Nanak Ram, in commemoration of his meeting with Baba Priyatam Das Udasi in the late 1770s. The Hyderabad official stands with his son, Lakhpat Rai (both identified in gold-lettered Nasta'liq script), with hands clasped in homage to the Udasi sadhu. The inclusion of the ten Sikh Gurus, beginning with Guru Nanak under the tree dressed in a patchwork gown and ending with Guru Gobind Singh (bottom-right), and the faithful rebabi, Bhai Mardana, clearly conveys Nanak Ram's spiritual leanings.

† The akhara later came to own considerable property including houses in Gaya, Dacca and Benares in the east, Amritsar in the north, Broach (Gujarat) in the west, and Nashik in the south, as well as other places in India.



(also known as Allahabad), situated at the confluence of the rivers Ganga and Yamuna, in 1779.<sup>25</sup>

Chandu Lal inherited his uncle's philanthropic bent and, as a devotee of Baba Priyatam Das, gave generously to Udasi establishments all over India. He commemorated Guru Nanak's tour of southern India by commissioning the construction of several shrines that were placed in the care of Udasi sadhus: the Chandu Lal Muth at Rameshwaram; at Sri Rangam in Trichunapalli; at Trinamallai in Tamil Nadu; at Kanchipuram in Chennai; and at Guntur in Andhra Pradesh.<sup>26</sup> In the distant Punjab, he contributed lavishly to the construction of the Durbar Sahib in Dera Baba Nanak, Gurdaspur. This small brick and lime shrine marked the spot where relics once belonging to Guru Nanak were buried,<sup>†</sup> and where the Udasi mahant was appointed with the consent of the Bedis, the lineal descendants of Guru Nanak.<sup>27</sup>

Baba Priyatam Das was enormously influential with the Sikhs in Punjab. Working in tandem with his closest associate, Baba Santokh Das (d. c. 1790), who founded the Brahmboota Akhara in the precincts of the Harimandir Sahib in 1753, Baba Priyatam Das undertook a project to ensure the constant supply of water to the Harimandir Sahib tank. Between 1781 and 1784 and with the assistance of the Sikh chiefs, they had a channel dug that took water from the Shahi canal, which was fed by the River Ravi, directly to the holy tank.

Many among the ruling classes expressed their reverence for Udasi sadhus like Priyatam Das by granting dharamarth jagirs for the maintenance of their akharas and deras for the purposes of spiritual, humanitarian, and educational work. In return, the grantor received their blessings for protection and prosperity. One of those who sought such blessings from Priyatam Das was a young Sikh chieftain, Maha Singh Sukarchakia (d. 1790).

The son of the famed Buddha Dal marksman, Charat Singh (d. 1770), Maha Singh was opportunistic, courageous, reckless, and at times brutal—a perfect mix that propelled his Sukkarchakkia Misl from a position of comparative obscurity to that of being one of the most prominent. His marriage to Raj Kaur (d. 1792), the daughter of Gajpat Singh, chief of Jind, strengthened his position among his contemporaries but the lack of an heir troubled him. The couple sought the blessings of the benevolent Baba Priyatam Das at Amritsar. It is said that a prayer uttered on their behalf by the Udasi Baba resulted in a son being born in 1780. The name chosen for the boy was Ranjit Singh, “victorious

<sup>†</sup> The upper portion including the dome (*gumbaz*) was gold plated by Ranjit Singh in 1827.



tiger in battle". Maha Singh would not live long enough to witness his progeny achieve the magnificent triumph that had eluded him: that of becoming the undisputed sovereign of Punjab.

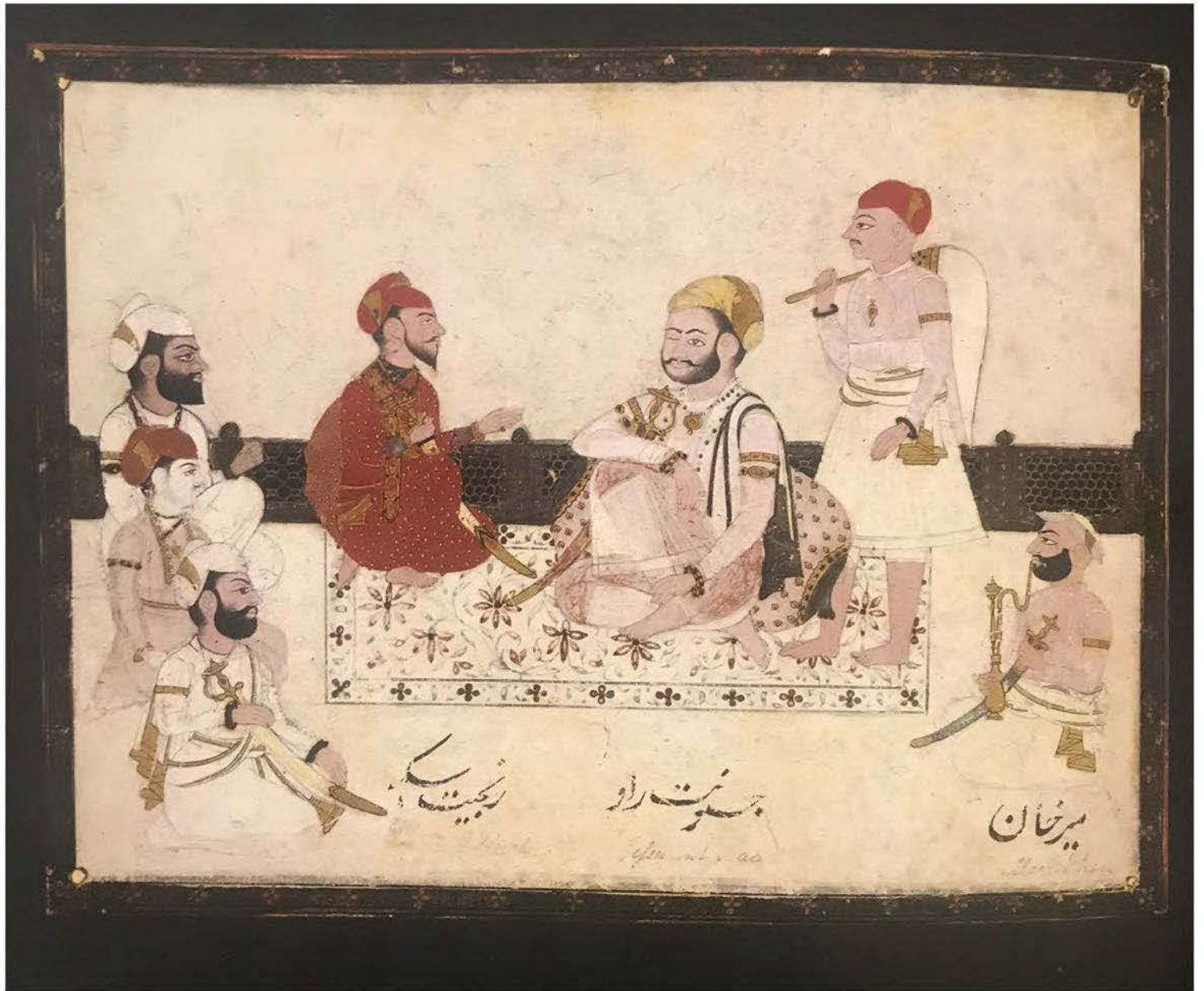
A view looking across the Musi after a major flood had washed through Hyderabad in 1908. To the right of the Puranapul (Old Bridge) is one of the many temples built by Chandu Lal.

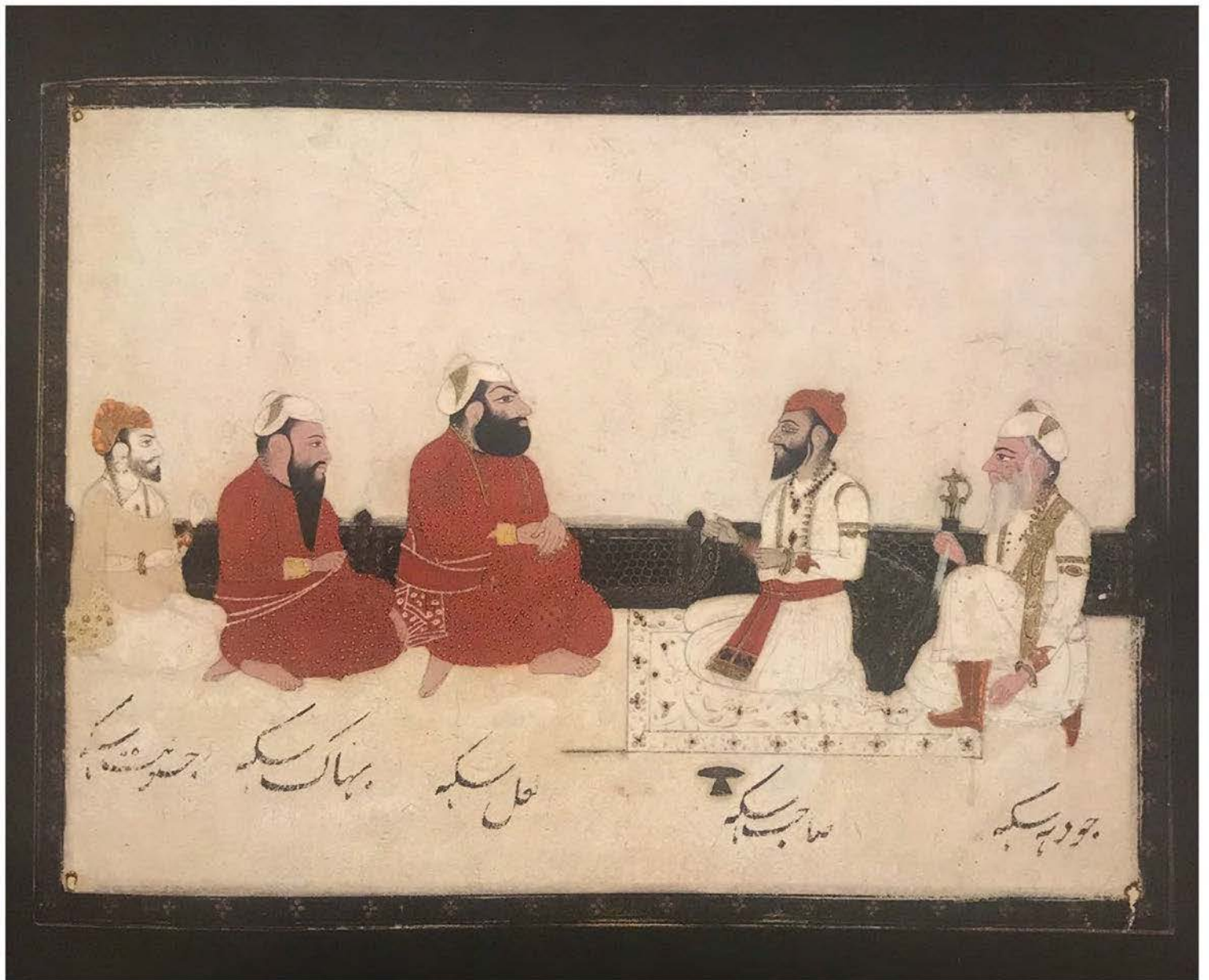


When Maha Singh died in 1790, he left 20,000 rounds of shot which his ten-year-old son, Ranjit Singh, happily spent firing at marks to perfect his marksmanship.<sup>28</sup> This early appetite for arms flourished into a remarkable military career of conquest and expansion of territory: by the age of twelve he had taken control of the Sukkarchakia Misl; by nineteen he had forced from Zaman Shah (d. 1801), the king of Afghanistan, a grant of Lahore, which he seized by force in 1799; two years later he proclaimed himself maharaja of the Sikhs; and at the age of twenty-two he proved his might by annexing Amritsar, thus becoming master of the two major cities of Punjab.

Having subdued and appropriated the resources of the old Sikh guard, the "Lion of Punjab" finally met his match in 1805. Acute difficulties arose between him and the East India Company as to the rights of overlordship of the cis-Sutlej portion of Punjab. The differences proceeded almost to the point of war; but at the last moment Ranjit Singh gave way, and for the future, faithfully observed his engagements with the British.









PREVIOUS LEFT: This is the earliest documented painting of Ranjit Singh (dressed entirely in red and identified in the Nasta'liq inscription). The event shown is that of the 1805 conference between the one-eyed ruler of Lahore and Jaswant Rao Holkar (centre). Holkar, who also happened to be blind in one eye, was defeated by the British and pursued by Lord Lake into Punjab. When Ranjit Singh declined to take up arms against the British, the Maratha leader was compelled to surrender at Amritsar in December 1805. A month later, the British signed their first treaty with Ranjit Singh.

PREVIOUS RIGHT: During the negotiations that took place in 1805 between Ranjit Singh, Lord Lake and Jaswant Rao Holkar, representatives of the Phulkian States were active participants. The most important are shown in this gathering: the aged Jodh Singh of Kalsia (far right) was the most strenuous advocate for war against the British; his temper was cooled by Sahib Singh of Patiala (immediately in front of him) who was the head of the most powerful state south of the Satluj; facing Sahib Singh are (from right to left) Lal Singh of Kaithal, Mahik Singh, and Jaswant Singh of Nabha.

One of the agreements signed was the Treaty of Amritsar in 1809.<sup>†</sup> It carried hopes for a "perpetual friendship" between the British government and the State of Lahore. Not only did the treaty delineate Punjab's southern-most river, the Satluj, as the border between the two powers, it also secured the independence of the eastern Sikh states, including Patiala, Nabha and Jind, lying between the Satluj and the Yamuna.

Independent of the kingdom of Lahore, these kings (and the other Sikh kings of Kapurthala, Kaithal and Faridkot) found themselves tightly sandwiched between Ranjit Singh and the British who had advanced to Delhi after having snatched it from the Marathas in 1804.

Some of the Phulkian chiefs feared absorption by Ranjit Singh, a monarch driven by an obsession to become supreme sovereign over the Sikhs. The British stepped forward with an offer of protectorate status on the condition that the cis-Satluj Sikhs provide political and military service to them at any time of general danger. The Phulkian kings ratified the agreement in 1809, thereby sealing Ranjit Singh's southern boundary and forcing him to withdraw all territorial claims across the river. This aspect of the agreement perturbed the Sikh monarch who found his enthusiasm for his 'perpetual friends' temporarily dampened.



It was not long before Ranjit Singh began to receive representations from other Indian rulers who had also fared badly against British diplomacy, or expected to do so in the near future.

The quartet of Daulat Rao Scindia, Jeswant Rao Holkar, the Raja of Bharatpur and Amrit Rao, the brother of the Peshwa who resided at Benares, approached Ranjit Singh and requested he join them in a confederacy against the British Government. Mindful of the Company's military strength and its enviable tradition of success on Indian soil, Ranjit Singh was at a loss as to the course of action he should pursue. Anxious to know the conditions of the various States in India under British influence, he decided to contact one of the most powerful and politically astute men that he knew: Raja Chandu Lal. Since both men were ardent devotees of Baba Priyatam Das, Ranjit Singh felt he could trust the minister's opinion.

He dispatched a letter through a confidential emissary, Goor Singh, "a Sikh

<sup>†</sup> That agreement was negotiated by Charles Metcalfe who succeeded Henry Russell as resident of Hyderabad in 1820.

of respectable appearance and decent manners.”<sup>29</sup> Having arrived at Hyderabad in April 1810, the emissary presented himself at Chandu Lal’s residence where the minister generally conducted the daily affairs of state. The reception was civil, and after the usual complimentary expressions in the name of his master, Goor Singh explained why the minister’s advice was being sought:

...not only because they were brothers in faith but because he [Ranjit Singh] had a high opinion of Chandulall’s wisdom and prudence and because Raja Chandulall must be well acquainted both with the real state of affairs in India and with the resources, power, disposition and views of the British Government.<sup>30</sup>

Ranjit Singh requested an acknowledgement that his message had been received, followed by a return deputation from Chandu Lal to Lahore to “communicate his sentiments and advice”.<sup>31</sup> Chandu Lal listened to the messenger’s every word before replying, “in general terms of compliment to Ranjit Singh’s message and... that as the subject was of much delicacy and importance it would require some days’ reflection.”<sup>32</sup>

With this in mind, the minister decided to defer the actual detail of the “reflection” to his own political master, the resident. Chandu Lal’s *munshi* (clerk) Sharaf-ud-din Khan, presented Ranjit Singh’s letter to Thomas Sydenham, who immediately reported the matter to the Imperial Government:

Sharfuddin then put Ranjit Singh’s letter into my hands and concluded by saying that Raja Chandulall would be guided implicitly by my advice and begged to know whether any answer should be given to Ranjit Singh’s letter and in what terms the letter should be couched; Sharfuddin added that no communication had been made on the subject either to the Nizam or to Munirulmulk. I told Sharfuddin Khan in reply that upon a point of such delicacy, I should be anxious to consult the wishes of the Governor-General and for that purpose I suggested that he should give no further answer to Goor Singh until I heard from Madras. I was also desirous to send the original letter to Madras and that no answer should be given until I should have ascertained the pleasure of the Governor-General upon the subject.<sup>33</sup>

It was clear to Sydenham that Chandu Lal desired to send a reply “in such terms as may give the Raja of Lahore a favourable opinion of our character and power



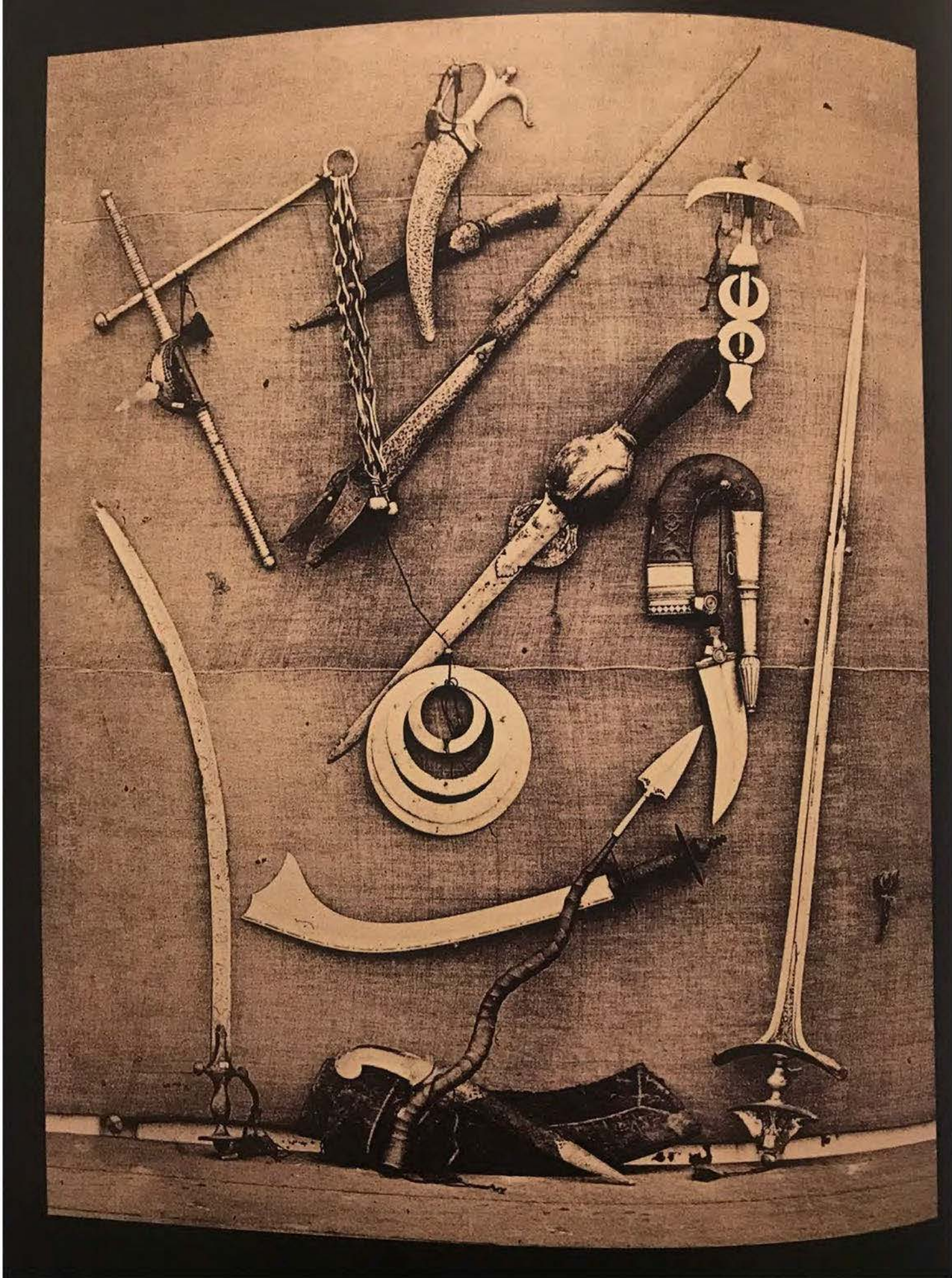
and may incline him to court our friendship and alliance."<sup>34</sup> The content of any response sent, though not known with certainty, appears to have convinced Ranjit Singh that overtly, at least, he should remain faithful to his treaty obligations.<sup>35</sup> Although this policy decision did nothing to appease the anti-British element within his court, he knew that he could never stop contemplating the distant prospect of war with the *firangi*.<sup>†</sup>

Now that the two Sikh statesmen had established contact, increasing diplomatic relations between the States of Lahore and Hyderabad would change the history of Hazoor Sahib forever.

<sup>†</sup> The African Moors knew the Franks as "Frang", a term introduced into India by the Muslims who pronounced it as "Firangi". The term eventually came to refer to Europeans in general.

## 5. THE SIKH THREAT







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The accession of Sikandar Jah in 1803 and the end of the war with the Marathas coincided with a new era for Hyderabad. For over a century, the region had been the scene of constant, almost annual, warfare.

It was the introduction of the system of subsidiary alliance with the British in 1800 that brought the State's external affairs under control; Mysore had become a friendly state; in Poona the alliance was sufficient to keep the Marathas quiet, while a larger force was stationed in Hyderabad, affording ample protection of its dominions against any danger from Scindia, Holkar and Nagpur. Only the province of Berar, recently re-conquered from Nagpur, remained in a state of anarchy owing to the inroads of the Pindari hordes. A large proportion of its inhabitants had either been killed or had emigrated to safer pastures elsewhere.

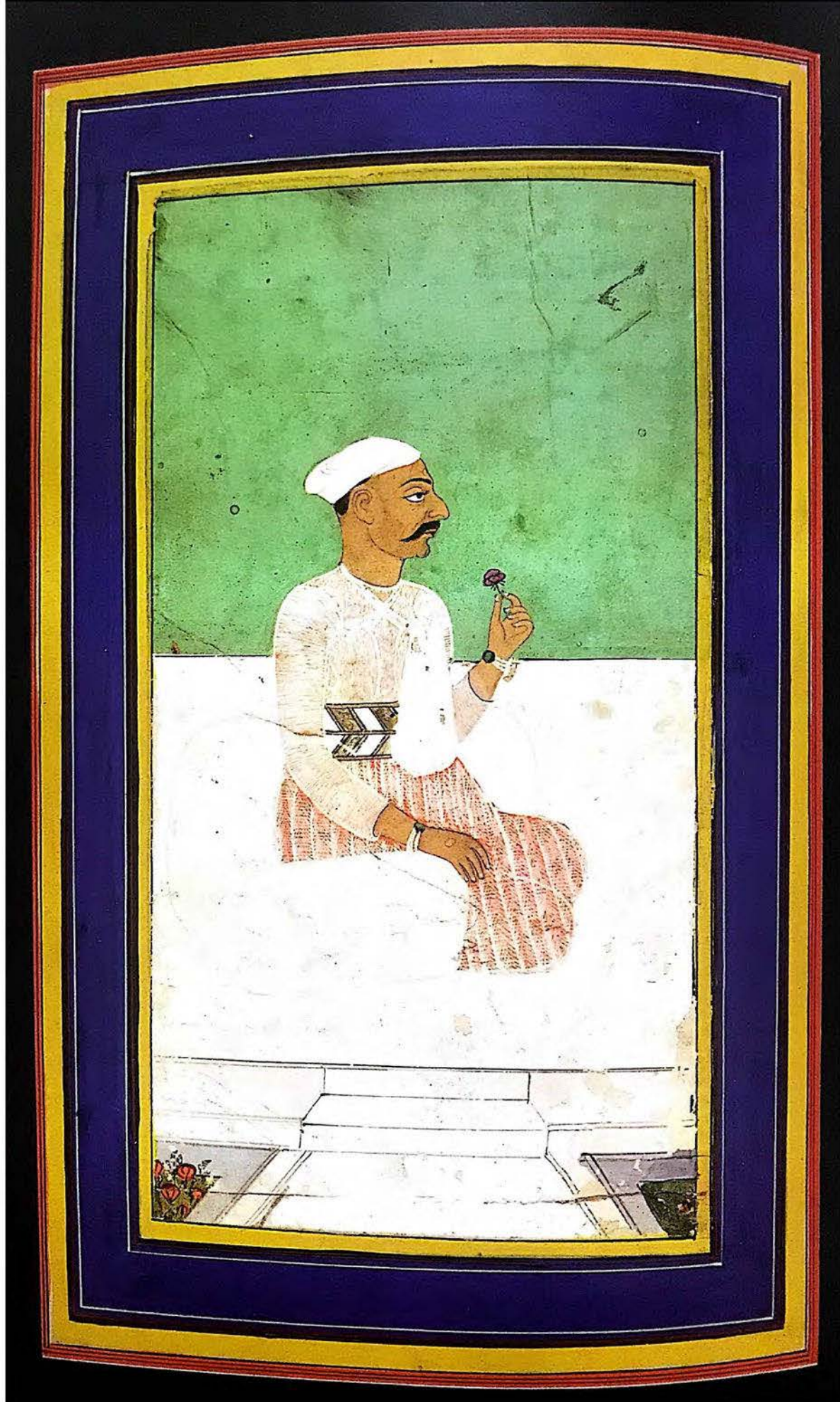
During the period in which the government was constantly engaged with foreign enemies, internal affairs tumbled into chaos. The land had been devastated and in many parts it was virtually depopulated; in the absence of a settled revenue administration confusion reigned everywhere. Petty rajas and *zamindars* (land owners) were frequently in a state of revolt, refusing to pay their tribute (*peshkash*) until forced to do so. The greater nobles enjoyed almost regal powers in their states, exercising the power of life and death over the inhabitants within the boundaries of their jagirs.

The cost of maintaining the nizam's army of military levies organised into regiments, many of which were led by European and Eurasian mercenaries, continued to be problematic. The disordered administration was unable to reign in the huge expenditure being spent on this comparatively outdated force, not to mention the 15,000 men required to co-operate with the British Subsidiary Force in the event of war. The financial situation was exasperated by the multitude of irregular troops, infantry and cavalry, maintained by the noblemen closely connected with the court and to whom assignments of land were made for that purpose.

The troops of the nizam's irregular force, *Nazm-i-Jama'iat* flouted law and order to live off the land for want of regular payment from their employment. In order to meet its payroll obligations the government under Chandu Lal began farming out state revenue land (*tankhab jagirs*) to these military units. This 'solution' not only decreased the state's revenue base, it also provided mercenary troops with territorial bases from which they eventually threatened the state. They soon became major creditors and landholders of the state. To expedite payments they would often besiege or imprison their debtors. In meeting the costs of government, a vicious cycle developed in which Chandu Lal was forced to rely increasingly on banking firms and moneylenders who gave loans to the

An assortment of weapons displayed at the Madras Exhibition of 1857. Among them can be seen a set of *chakkar* quoits of descending sizes and a *gojgah* turban adornment (hanging upside down).





State only on the security of districts assigned to them as jagirs for the collection of revenue. The insecurity of tenure added to the exploitation of the peasant cultivator, as the assignee sought to recover his loan quickly through the use of hired guns, a service typically undertaken by the irregular troops of the nizam's army and other newly arrived mercenaries.



When Henry Russell became resident in 1811, the nizam's army numbered approximately 70,000 men, the vast majority being irregulars quartered in the troublesome Berar Province where "their presence was as much feared by the agriculturalists as was that of the Pindari freebooters."<sup>1</sup>

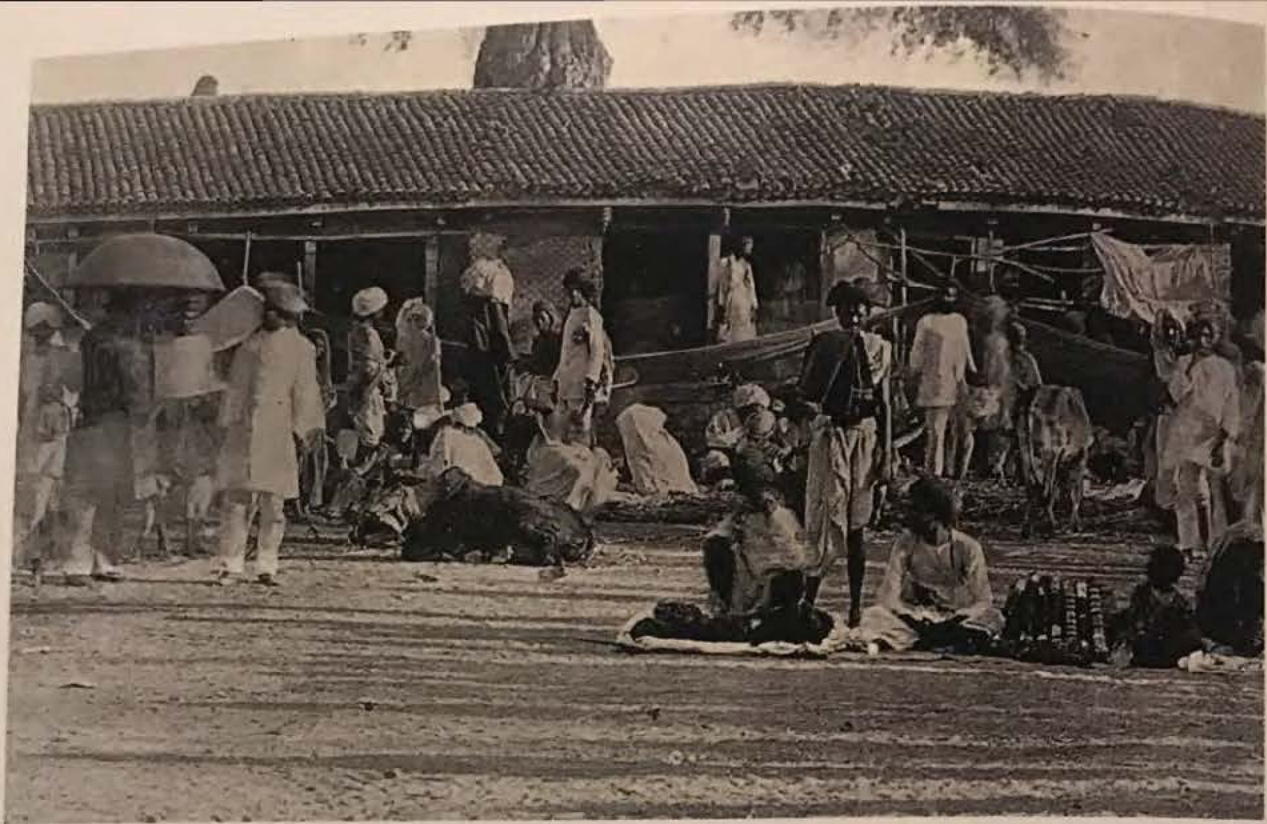
Having formed the opinion that the nizam's nominally large but badly armed and disciplined force was not a reliable support, the resident decided on reforming and reorganising a small portion of it. He was given a free hand in the reforms by Raja Chandu Lal. This nucleus of military material initially called the Russell Brigade later became the Hyderabad Contingent. In order to maintain anything like a thorough state of discipline, the resident insisted on the absolute necessity to ensure regular payments to the troops. This was a habit entirely unfamiliar to the Hyderabad military authorities: troops were allowed to remain in arrears of pay for months on end until they took matters into their own hands. To see their arrears discharged, it was not unknown for them to break out into open revolt, tie their officers to guns and threaten to blow them away.

Controlled by British officers, the Brigade was essentially a British force, paid in some manner or other, directly or indirectly, from the nizam's treasury. The fixed salaries of the officers and men fell due every month and constituted a major financial obligation. Under arrangements with the Hyderabad Government the regular payments to the troops was guaranteed by a banking firm William Palmer & Co. Its founder, Palmer, was a Eurasian who had retired from the service in the nizam's army in 1810 to pursue the more lucrative path of private trade. A deal was concluded with the sanction of the governor-general and the resident that saw the Hyderabad Government reimburse the banking house either by cash payments from the revenue or by assignments of land.<sup>2</sup> Knowing the governor-general's predilection towards the Palmers, Chandu Lal assiduously cultivated their friendship. He gave regular pensions to the members of the Palmer family from the State treasury amounting to nearly 80,000 rupees per month.

Punctuality of payment, however, was not one of the stricter measures en-

Raja Chandu Lal Bahadur, c. 1810. As virtual ruler of Hyderabad, the Sikh peshkar maintained a busy schedule. Rising early enough to get through his religious observances by daylight, he conducted the affairs of state until midnight. Before retiring for the night, he would indulge in his most cherished recreations, music and literature, typically spending an hour in the company of singers, musicians and poets eminent for their learning and skill.





ABOVE: The bazaar of Nanded.

OPPOSITE AND OVERLEAF: These illustrated folios from *Fuqara'-i Hind*, an early nineteenth-century Persian manuscript describing different Hindu spiritual orders, show an Udasi wearing a *seli-topi* at prayer and a "Govind-Singhi" ("follower of Govind Singh"), a term used to describe the Akali-Nihangs.

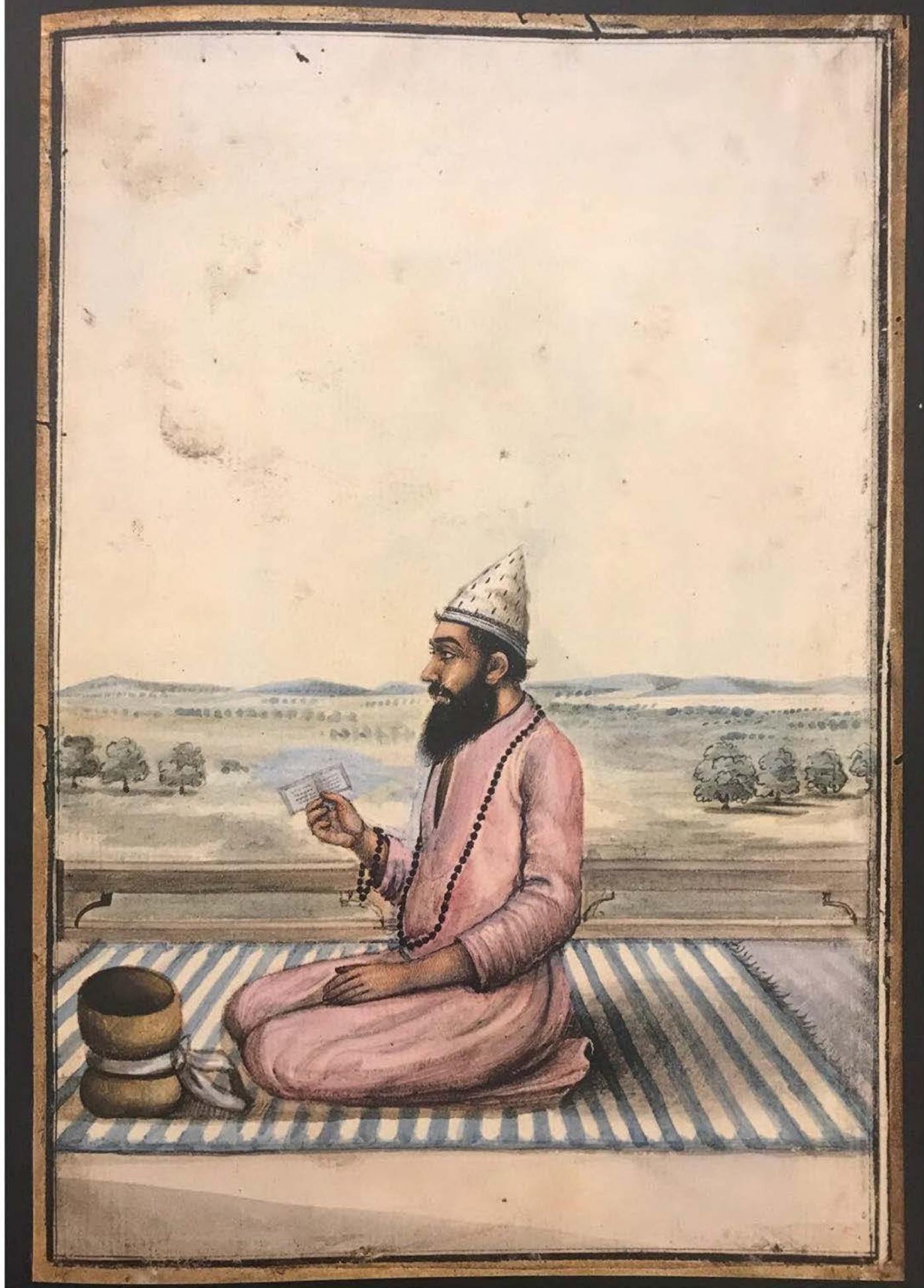
forced by the government and, with interest charged at the rate of twenty-four percent, the cost of the Brigade soon constituted a very heavy drain on the nizam's treasury. The proud nizam refused to entertain calls for a reduction to his very large army so a timorous Chandu Lal continued to supply funds to the resident for his "special hobby", resulting in a period of financial embarrassment lasting a quarter of a century that threatened to plunge the State into the depths of insolvency. To raise the sums required for these disbursements, Chandu Lal contracted debts to the bankers and capitalists of Hyderabad, and let out the revenues of the country to the highest bidder.

Day by day, the country was driven into the merciless grip of the Palmers. The firm's powers increased to such an extent that it could employ armed troops to storm the villages for extorting taxes from the poor inhabitants. From a mere banking agency it rose to the position of receiving commissions, and acted as an agency to collect debts. Where the nizam's government failed to realise the revenues, the firm succeeded in coercing them out of the poor peasantry.<sup>3</sup> The prestige and power that the Palmers commanded began to identify the bank with the British Government.

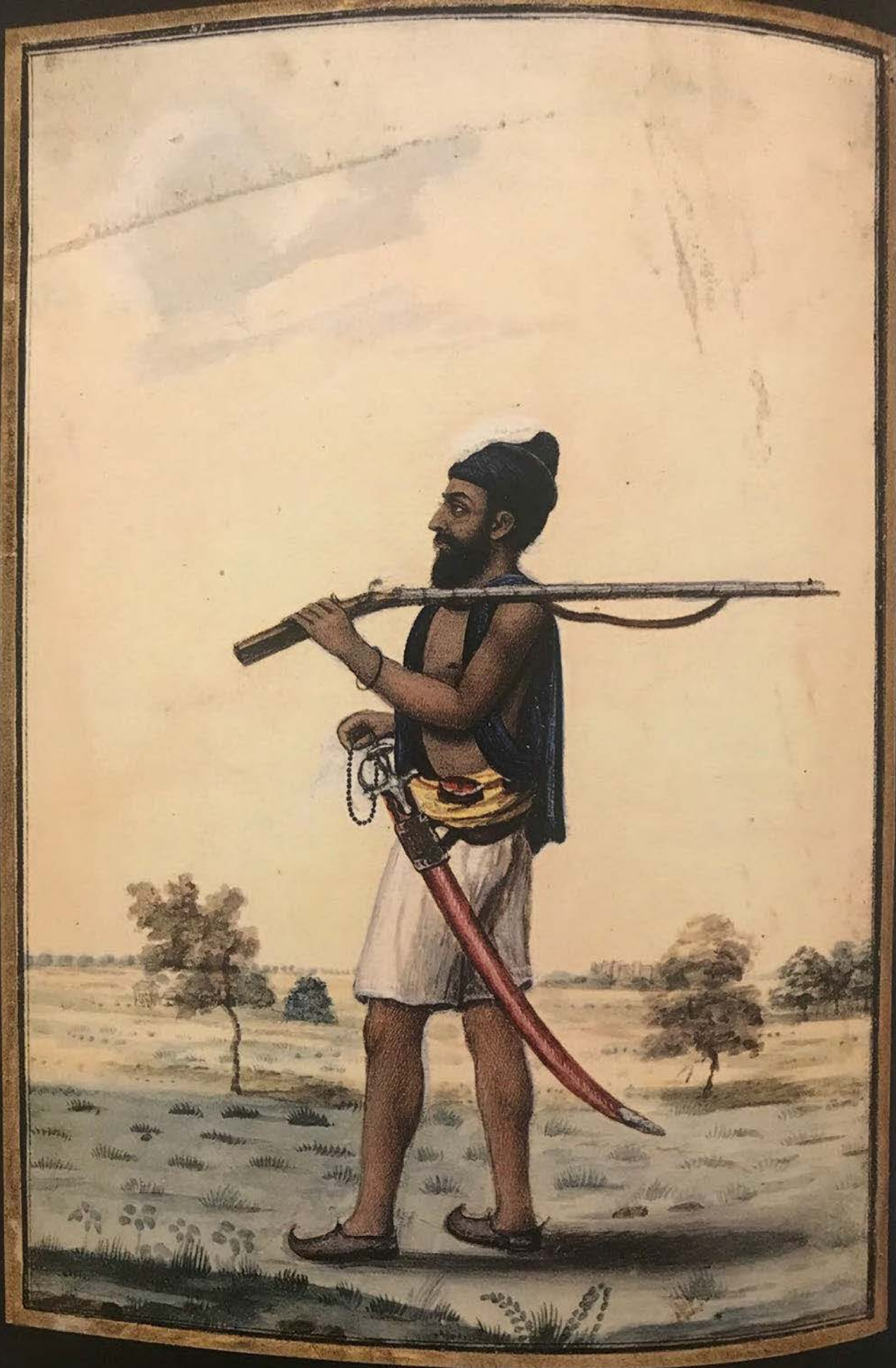
The nizam watched powerlessly as conditions in his dominions steadily deteriorated. The administration of the state was in a bad shape, land tenures insecure, revenues unaccounted for and his own officers and ministers unreliable. Sikandar Jah blamed the acute weakening of his government on the tightening hold of the British and the loose reigns of his Sikh peshkar.

These circumstances provided fuel for Munir-ul-Mulk's anti-British fire. He was constantly persuading the nizam that the peshkar was endeavouring to









build up a strong position for himself by aligning the British with the Hindus against the nizam and the Asafia State. Sikandar Jah, thoroughly alarmed at this reported development, took serious measures to defend himself, calling on the allegiance of the mansabdars, "by an apprehension, with which he seems to be suddenly seized that Chandu Lal had joined the English in a design against his Government and treasures, and that his life was threatened with immediate danger."<sup>4</sup> However mistaken the nizam might have been in these fears, communal feeling was real and not imaginary; indeed the resident had taken care not to make Chandu Lal the diwan in place of Munir-ul-Mulk because of the inevitable reaction amongst the Muslim nobility.

One of the factors that undoubtedly played on Munir-ul-Mulk's mind was the manner in which Chandu Lal exploited his religious ties with the Sikh colony at Nanded to bolster his own position. Supported by the most powerful man in the kingdom, these Hazoori Sikhs were unbridled in their military exploits and freely hired themselves out for service in the Muslim state. It must have disturbed the Muslim diwan that Chandu Lal's personal bodyguard, consisting of over a thousand Akali-Nihangs, were stationed at the heart of Hyderabad, even though they were said to harbour "the most deadly antipathy to the Mahomedans."<sup>5</sup>



Raja Chandu Lal gave full recognition to the spiritual and military traditions of the Hazoori Sikhs. Early in his career, this devout Sikh had extended his patronage to the sacred takht and the bodies of Udasis and Akali-Nihangs who had settled at the Sikh colony to serve the shrine and its pilgrims.

The colony was situated in the suburbs of Nanded which was considered a pretty town by European travellers who occasionally passed by it; many of its 4,000 houses were brick-built, and, unusually for that part of the world, rising two stories in height. The streets of the town were clean and neat, crossing each other at right angles. An old stone fort in a ruinous state flanking its western point stood on the precipitous banks of the river to form a rather striking object of interest. During the Third Anglo-Maratha War, a military officer who halted here briefly in 1818 penned a brief report on the Sikh colony that was home to just under 4,000 people.<sup>6</sup> At the time, it contained a well-run teaching establishment with a flourishing student population:

At this place we were much gratified by a visit to the Seik College, where there are upwards of three hundred of that class instructed in matters of



This steel war quoit or chakkar dating from the late eighteenth or early nineteenth century is inscribed in gold with three Gurmukhi verses, presumably to bring divine protection to its wearer. The first verse is by Guru Arjan:

"One Creator, Preserver, Destroyer. Parbrahm protects our head and forehead; Parmeshvar protects our hands and body. Gopal Swami protects our soul; Jagdeshvar protects our wealth and feet. The Merciful Guru protects all, and destroys fear and suffering. The Lover of bhagats, the Master of the masterless, Nanak seeks the sanctuary of that Imperishable Primal Being." ("Salok Sahiskriti, M5", AGGS, 1358.)

Next follows an anonymous eighteenth-century passage lauding Guru Nanak and Guru Gobind Singh:

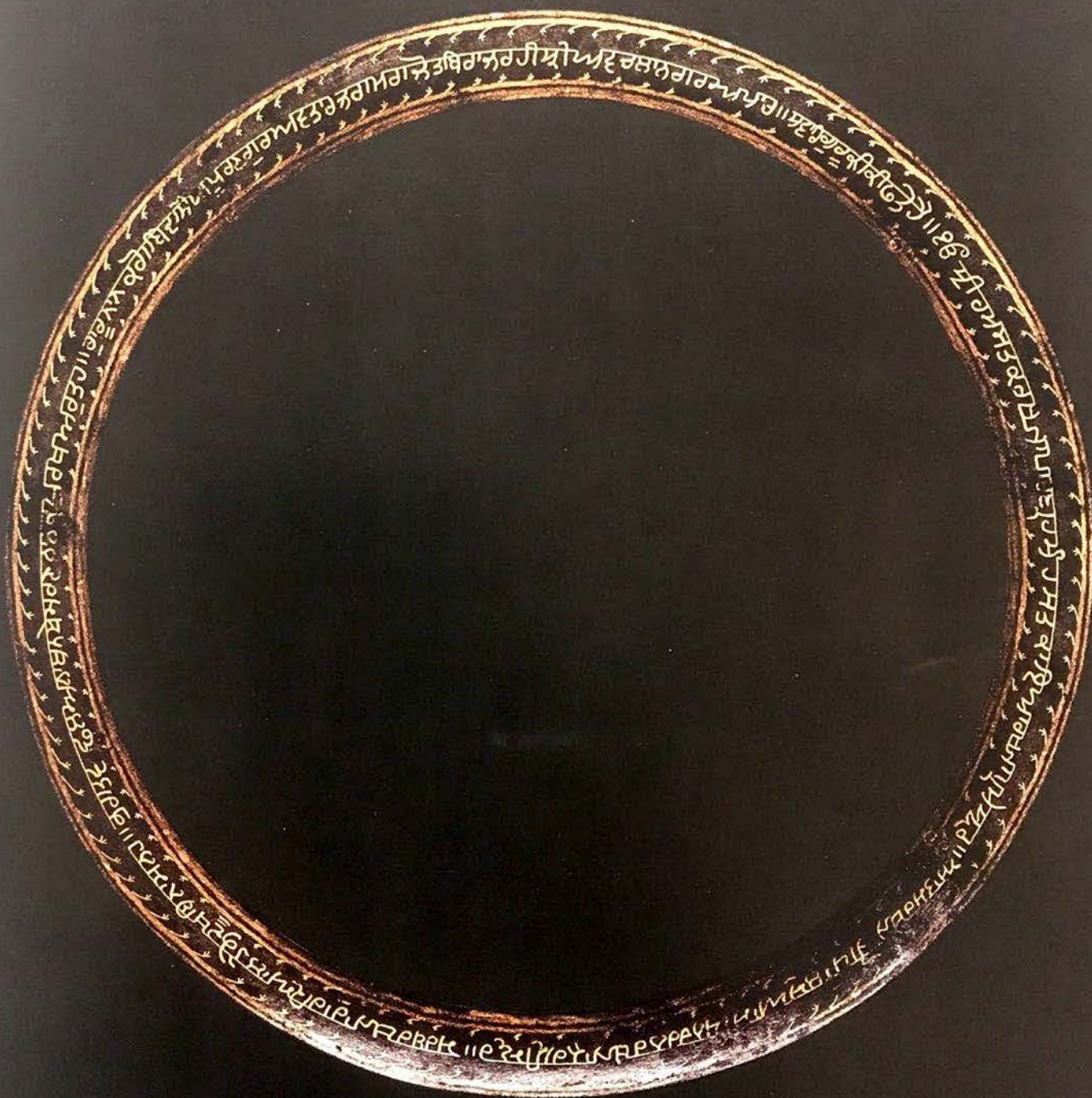
"Guru Nanak-Gobind Singh took avtar as the perfect Guru. Their boundless resplendent light is situated in the city of Abchal Nagar."

The third phrase is the salutary invocation of the Khalsa: "Victory belongs to Sri Vaheguru".

their religion, and the whole establishment is seemingly conducted with great regularity and application. The sages who preside there deliver out their lectures from their respective stalls, occupying at a convenient distance from each other two sides of the hall of audience. These instructors appeared venerable, pious, and respectable old men, seated upon carpets, and having large and richly embroidered pillows before them, whence from their books they delivered out their discourses to their hearers. The Seik student always appears in public well dressed; and in stature, deportment, and habit, strikes the visitor at once with a prepossession in his favour. They are generally tall, of elegant symmetry, and in their countenances alone carry an expression of superiority and manliness far above any other tribe in India.<sup>7</sup>

As a military man, the officer was intrigued by the Sikhs' martial regalia and accoutrements, especially the ancient quoit, famed for its deadliness in the well-practiced hands of the Sikhs:

They generally dress in dark clothes, with lofty blue turbans, and are on all occasions armed with a sword and shield, and many of them with an instrument of war, which they use with the greatest dexterity and effect. This weapon resembles a common quoit, with this difference, that the plate of the former is perfectly flat on both sides, and not above the eighth of an inch in thickness. These are commonly carried in a dozen or two on the upper ball or crest of the turban, where they sit close together, and quite at hand for service. In using these missile weapons, the fore finger of the right hand is introduced into its cavity in the centre, and the inner edge brought to rest firmly on the ball of the same finger; the thumb is applied outside and over the edge (which is as sharp as a common knife), merely to direct the aim. The right leg is then drawn back, and the Seik, raising his arm above his head, and inclining his body downwards, discharges it in a horizontal direction, just as a boy skims a sheet of water with a slate. These weapons fly through the air faster than the eye can follow them, and the Seik makes as sure of hitting an object the size of a man at seventy or eighty yards, as the best marksman could with a rifle. These weapons are used with best effect against bodies of cavalry, where, even at the distance of two hundred yards, one of them coming in contact, with the horse's leg or body will be sure to break the former, or plunge right into the latter. The Seiks use also bows and arrows with great skill, and are elegant horse-





men, on these occasions using the spear and matchlock, and on all public ceremonies displaying their beautifully embroidered black banners, with curious devices upon them.<sup>8</sup>

Under Chandu Lal's auspices, most of the Hazoori Sikhs recruited by the state joined its irregular Sikh unit, the Jama'iat-i-Sikhan. Small bodies were also to be found employed in most of the large towns in the district of Nanded. For example, at Rajoora, a town of 500 houses situated on the highroad from Hyderabad to Jaulna, the naib employed about 200 Sikhs in his garrison. They performed a range of duties including the preservation of order and the collection of custom duties at large annual fairs.<sup>9</sup>

In 1812, a small number had been drafted into the two newly raised regiments of infantry of the Russell Brigade. Chandu Lal raised one, and his brother, Raja Govind Baksh, governor of Berar, the other for employment against bandits infesting the country.<sup>10</sup>

Aside from the Sikh colony at Nanded, Raja Govind Baksh also recruited from other Sikh enclaves that had sprung up elsewhere in the nizam's dominions. For example, in return for its military services, the Sikh settlement at Amraoti, a rich town in his district of Berar, received generous gifts of land.<sup>11</sup> Major Bevan passed through the town in 1818 and came across "a college for the sect of Hindoos called Sikhs." He assessed its inhabitants to be "a fine athletic race of men" and was treated to a demonstration of their skill at arms:

they use a singular weapon, something like a quoit, which they throw with such precision as to cut off the legs of sheep at a distance of fifty or sixty yards. We were gratified by several exhibitions of their skill while we remained in the neighbourhood.<sup>12</sup>

To the north of Amraoti and still within the Berar province was Ellichpur, an ancient city under the responsibility of another relation of Chandu Lal named Rao Raja Ram. As *naib subadar* (deputy governor) he had charge of the eastern portion of Berar. A European who was present during the siege of a small village that had once belonged to the Marathas and had stubbornly refused to discard its old loyalty, could not but help to notice the curious mix of troops serving under the Rao; conspicuous among the thousand or so "Persians in chain armour" and "spearmen, bowmen, matchlockmen" of other races, were a body of "Seiks in their elegant and peculiar dress, and armed with their chukrahs."<sup>13</sup>

Further to the south and adjoining the province of Berar was Bidar, which





Major Moyle Sherer passed through around 1821. At a fair, he fell in with a party of Hazoori Sikhs, comprising Akali-Nihangs and their wives. Their quoit-throwing skills, martial accoutrements and palpable fighting spirit left a memorable impression on him:

They were infantry, armed with swords, creeses [daggers], and matchlocks, and carrying a curious missile weapon like a quoit, but lighter, and with sharp edges. These they whirl round the finger, and throw with unerring and fatal precision, to the forehead of an opponent. I hardly ever saw any where men more graceful, stronger, and better made. Their complexions were a fair olive. They wore beards curling round the chin. The turbans small and high, and peculiar in form. The loin-cloth wrapped close under the fork, leaving the limb entirely unincumbered, save by a light handsome sandal. Their women were handsome, with fine forms, and their robes much loaded with ornament.<sup>14</sup>

They were a talkative bunch; some told Sherer that they were in the service of Chandu Lal, and that in the nizam's dominions two or three thousand were generally entertained.

Others related how they had recently fought in the war waged by the Sikh army of Lahore against the Afghan forces of Kandahar. He left them at sunset when "they assembled round the oldest, a venerable-looking man, who

The province of Berar, c. 1770. Nanded is shown at the very bottom of this map. To the north is Ellichpur (spelt "Eletchpour"), and to the north-east is Amraoli ("Amvorali"). Both places boasted of modest Sikh populations. The vignettes show a purification ceremony taking place in a river, the Holi festival, egg play, worshippers at a temple, and the inhabitants of Berar.



A Sikh couple, early nineteenth century. By the time this painting was executed, the Singh-Khalsa had travelled the length and breadth of Hindustan, often as mercenary soldiers. Considering themselves Hindu, from Delhi to Calcutta, Hyderabad to Chennai, wherever they went they settled and married local Hindu women.

wore a long dark blue robe, and sung a hymn. He also repeated some form of prayer."<sup>15</sup>

British officers recorded other favourable impressions made by the Hazoori Sikhs. Major Macready, who spent some time in the district around 1820, considered the great number of Sikhs he met to be "the only part of the population whose appearance and demeanour were at all respectable."<sup>16</sup> He went on to describe how their

martial and manly contour of countenance, which, set off by their picturesque turbans, their black curling beards and whiskers, and their warlike appointments, forms a brigandish and interesting picture. They have more of the independent, self-confiding, military look than any Easterners I have seen. They never spoke as they passed us, but looked (at least, I fancied so) as I had seen French officers in Paris, "pale, but intrepid—sad, but unsubdued."<sup>17</sup>

There were occasions when the Sikhs and British were pitted against one another. In 1818, an army of approximately 3,500 Arabs, Gonds and Sikhs cut to pieces a small party of British officers and sepoys near Nagpur.<sup>18</sup> They were fighting for Appa Sahib, the ex-*raja* of Nagpur who, on the outbreak of the Third Maratha War, had thrown off his cloak of friendship and turned against the treaty of alliance signed with the British. He suffered multiple defeats and was forced to cede territory to the British. They reinstated him to the throne but when he was discovered to be conspiring, they deposed him in 1819. In custody and on his way to Allahabad, Appa Sahib escaped by bribing his guards. He made his way to Haridwar before proceeding to Punjab. At Amritsar, he made his arrival known to Ranjit Singh who promptly directed him to leave his territories. The timely intervention of the fiercely anti-British *jathedar* of the Buddha Dal, Akali Phoola Singh Nihang (1761–1823), who granted him protection, allowed Appa Sahib to evade the British and avoid recapture.<sup>19</sup>

Constantly armed with their lit matchlocks, naked swords and razor-sharp quoits, the Sikhs' confident swagger gave the impression of invincibility that served to irritate rather than impress some senior officials in the British Government. Their most vociferous detractor was Sir Charles Metcalfe (1785–1846), an experienced statesman and diplomat who took over from Henry Russell as resident at the end of 1820. He was quick to form the opinion that the military Sikhs of Hyderabad were a nuisance and a threat to the stability of the State. He was speaking from experience; a decade earlier while on a mission to their







spiritual homeland, Amritsar, he had experienced first-hand how dangerously volatile Sikh warrior-ascetics like Phoola Singh could be.



In 1808, the governor-general, Lord Minto selected the twenty-three-year-old Metcalfe for the important post of envoy to the court of Lahore. By the end of February 1809, he was camped on the outskirts of the walled city of Amritsar, during his negotiations with Ranjit Singh, then in his late twenties, over the terms of a treaty of friendship.

The timing coincided with the Shi'a festival of Moharram, which the Shi'a Muslim sepoys<sup>†</sup> of Metcalfe's small military escort decided to celebrate in grand style. Led by their band, they marked the occasion by taking out a series of raucous processions through the streets of Amritsar for several days. Their route wound by the Harimandir Sahib complex, then teeming with Akali-Nihangs who had converged there in the run-up to the annual military festival of Holla Mohalla. According to Ranjit Singh's court diarist, trouble was brewing: "The Akalis and the general public of Amritsar did not consider this unusual occurrence against their religion proper in Amritsar."<sup>20</sup>

Akali Phoola Singh Nihang sent two Nihangs to persuade the Muslim soldiers to either tone down their processions or re-route. The Nihangs and the sepoys met each other rudely; in the subsequent scuffle, a sepoy knocked a Nihang's *dumalla* (turban) to the ground. Phoola Singh was incensed when he came to hear of this insult to his faith. He dashed out of the complex towards the British camp with some four or five hundred companions armed with swords, spears and some matchlocks, "drums beating and colours flying."<sup>21</sup> When the escort's soldiers began "dropping in the ranks,"<sup>22</sup> the order was given to return fire. In the short skirmish that followed, five Akali-Nihangs were killed and twenty-five wounded, while the escort suffered seventeen wounded.<sup>23</sup> This encounter shocked both Metcalfe and Ranjit Singh who watched on helplessly as spectators.

In his report on the incident to his superiors at Calcutta, Metcalfe introduced the British Government to the name of Phoola Singh, the "notorious firebrand" who led the Akali-Nihang attack on his escort. Metcalfe came to know that he led

<sup>†</sup> Hindustani soldiers employed by the British army.

a military brotherhood who are considered as the peculiar defenders of the Temple and the Faith. Any person is admitted into this Brotherhood, who feels an inclination to join it. No qualification is necessary, but a sanguinary disposition, and any reinforcement to the body, from any religion, or any caste, is equally acceptable... Under the sanction of the supposed holy office they commit every enormity. They seem to be the terror of the people of the country, in the town of Amritsar particularly and to be free from the control of the Government. Some of them are distinguished by the appellation of Nungee Tulwar Akallee from their always carrying naked swords.”<sup>24</sup>

Metcalf held the view that the Sikh king’s “veneration of the Holy Temple would prevent his taking measures to punish the Akalis.” He saw no need to insist, however, “as the fanatics had had their thrashing already.”<sup>25</sup>

Even though Metcalfe had not suffered personally in the attack, it was with considerable relief that he vacated Amritsar and left the mad Akali-Nihangs behind him for good. Or so he thought.



A decade on from the Amritsar affair, Metcalfe was the British resident at Hyderabad. Under his stewardship, the once comfortable relationship between the office of peshkar and resident was about to come to an abrupt end.

Shortly before leaving office, his predecessor, Henry Russell, wrote appreciatively of Chandu Lal’s efforts during a difficult ten years at the helm:

When the present Minister, Rajah Chundoo Loll, succeeded to his office, in 1809, every department of the Government was already in a condition tending rapidly to decay. The administration under him has necessarily been one of expedients; but far from thinking that the present, difficulties are to be imputed to his mismanagement, it appears to me a matter of astonishment, that affairs have been administered as they have been... during the late war [with the Marathas], though Rajah Chundoo Loll was charged with the whole responsibility, without being invested with the full authority of Government; though he is a Member of a discordant administration, in which he has a rival instead of a colleague in Mooneerool Moolk; though his adherence to our interests has lost him the Nizam’s confidence, and deprived him of all those advantages, which even the





ABOVE LEFT: One of the founding fathers of British India, Sir Charles Metcalfe, c. 1835.



ABOVE RIGHT: The Buddha Dal's sixth jathedar, Akali Phoola Singh Nihang.

strongest Minister must derive from the favour and countenance of his sovereign; he still contrived to raise and equip a most respectable and useful body of troops, and furnished, in every particular, an active and efficient co-operation, without making any demand upon the Nizam's coffers, or receiving any extraordinary assistance from any other quarter. To those who compare what he has done with the means he had of doing it, his exertions must appear astonishing. Either the resources of the Government must have been improved, or they must have been applied with greater judgment: in either case, Chundoo Loll's merit as a Minister is conspicuous.<sup>26</sup>

To a critical Metcalfe, this glowing accolade was no surprise, given the close association between his predecessor and the peshkar. In a warm and revealing character sketch describing Chandu Lal's personality, strengths and weaknesses, Russell betrayed a great admiration and respect for the man which destiny (with some help from the British Government) had picked to hold the most challenging office in the realm:

Raja Chundoo Lal is of middling stature, very thin, and of rather a dark complexion. The expression of his countenance is mild, intelligent and thoughtful. He has lost his teeth, is much bent, and bears great appearance of infirmity. In his manners he is unaffected, and even humble. He is free





from ostentation of every kind, and is not expensive in his own family or person; but he is profuse and indiscriminate in what he considers to be charity, and is always in want of money. He has been very well educated, both as a scholar and a public officer. His understanding is sound, his talents quick, his memory retentive, his industry indefatigable, and he has great experience and aptitude in all the modes of business, from the highest branches down to the most minute detail. He does everything for himself, and the labour which he performs is almost incredible... His great, and perhaps his only defect, is a want of firmness and decision. He is said to be personally brave, but he is totally devoid of political courage. The very mention of a bold measure alarms him, and he resorts to every species of procrastination and expedient to avoid it. He is naturally humane and benevolent, but, like all weak men in power, he allows great severity and injustice to be practised under the sanction of his authority. His virtues belong to his private, and his faults to his public character. In his politics, though he is not bold, he is sensible and prudent.<sup>27</sup>

A snapshot of the shifting boundaries of India in the 1820s. In the north, Ranjit Singh's Sikh kingdom of Lahore is coloured green, the British territories, which include Delhi, are red, the Marathas possessions are shown in yellow, and the nizams of Hyderabad's dominions (in which Nanded town is shown) are demarcated in orange. The ceded territory of Berar is shown in blue.

Metcalf very properly began his duties as resident by reviewing the position of



the British Government in India vis-à-vis the Hyderabad State with special reference to the financial mismanagement of the nizam's all-powerful Sikh peshkar and the tightening hold of the British in the State's internal administration:

We never conquered the Nizam's territories: our relation with that prince has always been one of alliance... we have assumed much interference with the country, not warranted by any of our treaties. We effected the elevation of a Minister who, emboldened by our support, ceased to be the Minister of his own Sovereign, and became in fact the reckless ruler of the country... Our command of a considerable portion of the Nizam's troops still continues, but this is derived, not from any treaty, but from an arrangement with the Minister whom we supported, and who being in power finds this force essential for his own security and domination...<sup>28</sup>

Metcalf's reflections on the character of Chandu Lal lacked the warmth afforded him by Russell:

...here is a subordinate Minister lording it over his principle, and his Sovereign, and his Sovereigns subjects, by the support of a foreign power, and disposing of the revenues of an empire, without ever submitting an account to his master, and without acknowledging responsibility to any one.<sup>29</sup>

But Chandu Lal was a creature of the British Government. He was the instrument through which the British hoped to mould the Hyderabad administration to their own advantage. Governor-General Lord Hastings pointed out his pivotal role to Metcalfe: "I feared that, in your dissatisfaction at not finding in Chundoo Lal so perfect an instrument as you wished, you had overlooked the deep engagement of the Government to uphold him."<sup>30</sup> Metcalfe was not impressed with his government's compromising position.

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